

THE MYTH OF SECULARIZATION:
A GENEALOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation opens with a discussion on the ways in which definitions of religion are culturally, historically, hierarchically, and most importantly, *ideologically* constructed. Though many definitions present “religion” as a universal, neutral, and naturally occurring phenomenon, it becomes evident that these definitions developed as responses to particular Protestant theological questions. While this is true for a wide range of definitions, I focus on those offered in prominent secularization theories. These particular ideological constructions are concealed when the category of religion is presented as natural and universal. Therefore, one of the aims of this project is to expose the genealogical construction of the category of “the religious” in order to trace the ways in which it becomes distinguished from the newly emerging sphere of “the secular.” I then demonstrate the ways in which the construction of the category of religion functions to authorize particular constructs of power that are deeply engrained in sociological analyses of religion.

It is my contention that prominent theories of secularization continue to treat the categories of the religious and the secular as a binary set of neutral, universal categories, thus ignoring their hierarchical and ideological constructions. I then argue that the categories of the religious and the secular that are employed in discourses on secularization are largely non-representative and incapable of locating and effectively measuring “religion” over time and across cultures. Secularization theories rely upon particularly Protestant assumptions about what “the religious” and “the secular” entail while, at the same time, claiming to effectively measure

the existence of a much broader, general category: “religion.” This is problematic for (at least) two reasons: (1) it fails to account for the particularity and variability of how individuals and non-Western communities express their religiosity, and (2) it obfuscates dimensions of power involved in privileging the particular use of the categories while presenting them as universal, neutral, and benign categories.

In the end, I introduce a potential set of reasons as to why, in light of such criticisms, secularization theorists continue to employ largely non-representative criteria to determine rates of religiosity. In short, I suggest that the propelling and sustaining force behind secularization theories is their ability to function as proxy debates for political arguments about the social value of religion. I argue that such social-scientific research tells us more about the surveyor(s) than the surveyed. With these considerations in mind, I provide a recommendation in the advancement of the social scientific study of religion. Social surveyors and secularization theorists need to more seriously engage and account for the constructed nature of the category of religion. This will provide a better representation of the diversity and complexity of “the religious” while also allowing both theorists and ordinary people to begin challenging the ideological constructions that form its foundation.

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CHAPTER 1: FRAMING THE ARGUMENT

It is not uncommon for a text in religious studies to open with an exercise on the inherent problems in defining “religion.”¹ It is, after all, crucial to define the subject before engaging in its analysis. It is perhaps even more important to clarify a concept as mystifying as religion. Many scholars, however, engage in this exercise as more of a cursory proviso than as a serious engagement with the category of religion. For example, scholars speak to the inherent difficulties in defining religion before subscribing to a single definition out of “necessity.” What typically follows is an investigation that largely ignores these difficulties in favor of a normative definition where religion is presented as a neutral, universal, and naturally occurring phenomenon.

I argue that such definitional disputes are indicative of a much larger crisis in the academic study of religion, which can no longer afford to be ignored. Throughout this dissertation, I will look at a number of prominent definitions of religion in order to demonstrate their cultural and historical deficiency and to illustrate that they nonetheless remain useful to achieve particular ends. It is the combination of these two factors that has propelled a fundamentally flawed use of the term religion within a variety of disciplines. In chapter two, I focus on a number of definitions and theories of religion that emerge in the early post-Enlightenment period, for it is during this time that we witness the birth of *Religionswissenschaft*,² or the (social) scientific study of religion, which eventually evolves into

¹ One main focus on this dissertation is to demonstrate the ways in which the categories of “the religious” and “the secular” are contestable Western constructions; therefore, in many instances, “religious” and “secular” ought to be read with an assumed set of scare quotes attached. However, I have decided to leave them out, for the most part, so that the reader is not overly distracted.

² This term is coined by German philologist, Max Müller, whose contributions will be considered in the following chapter.

the field of religious studies. This newfound discipline is traditionally traced back to the philological investigations of F. Max Müller, whose “scientific” effort to categorize all of the people in the world proved to have profound effects on the trajectory of the study of religion.³ In short, Müller’s philological typologies sought to describe essentially *natural* religious distinctions throughout the world. This effectively replaced older, explicitly theological methods of categorization, which placed Protestantism on top, or at the center, of the world-religious anatomy. Because his philological method was presented as a “science,” his conclusions proved more resistant to criticism. Such divisions *appeared* to be the result of objective observations rather than particular constructions. I then look to the ways in which other post-Enlightenment theorists contributed significantly to a particular construction of the category of religion that remains present today.

The focus of this project engages with definitions of religion utilized by secularization theorists.⁴ Therefore, after engaging with the larger problem of defining religion I will demonstrate the ways in which secularization theorists rely upon ideologically specific definitions that present religion as a natural, universal, and neutral phenomenon. The conversation will then turn to the ways in which the category of religion is primarily the product of post-Enlightenment Protestant European scholarship. The historical, cultural, and theological particularities of this construction, however, are concealed in the presentation of a singular, universal, neutral, and natural category: religion. It is under the guise of such neutrality that these

³ F. Max Müller, *Anthropological Religion: The Gifford Lectures Delivered before the University of Glasgow in 1891* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), 61-88, 292-295.

⁴ I will be looking at theorists who argue that secularization is occurring as well as those who have responded to such arguments. This list will include, but is not limited to, Peter Berger, Steve Bruce, Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, Roger Finke, Grace Davie, Thomas Luckmann, and José Casanova.

definitions become useful to secularization theorists. Denying such ideological and hierarchical constructions depoliticizes each project, at least on the surface. The sociologist, for example, is *perceived* to be neutrally analyzing data, thus concealing any political motivations behind the analysis of religion.

In the end, I will raise the possibility that such political motivations remain present in discourses on secularization, existing behind (and are thus protected by) a veil of neutrality that is primarily informed by the terminologies of “the religious” and “the secular.” In short, the construction of the category of religion itself has a long history of determining *who* is included and excluded as well as *how* they are included and excluded. The project of defining religion has historically been a series of political-theological endeavors to demarcate the morally and theologically mature (“us”) from the amoral, theologically immature other (“them”). These older hierarchical inscriptions, which indicate social value, have been reimagined in current secularization debates. In this new imaginary, the explicit focus on theological value has been replaced by an obfuscated presentation of the social value of religion. That is, secularization debates have effectively concealed a variety of political arguments about the social value of religion in the definitions that theorists employ.⁵

This brings me to the work of Tomoko Masuzawa, who explains that the development of the categories of “religion” and “world religions” was the result of a primarily Protestant endeavor which functioned as a classificatory system to reinforce a particular hierarchical

⁵ While I will say more about this in chapter five, I am arguing that debates on secularization have predominantly fallen into two opposing camps. On the one hand, religion is either conceived of as the source of social and moral value while, on the other hand, religion is presented as a remnant of an older, irrational, pre-modern age which is becoming increasingly devoid of social value.

structure.⁶ In short, Europeans had a well-established method for categorizing the people of the world; there were Christians, Jews, Muslims, and “the rest.”⁷ This, she explains, is the “logic of European hegemony” – the notion that (Protestant) Christianity is the one true universal religion and that although other religions remain present, they are theologically and morally inferior.⁸ While the list of “world religions” eventually expands to include more than ten traditions, the logic of European hegemony remains present and continues to affect a number of contemporary academic discourses. She then argues that the language of pluralism, which is seemingly universal and inclusive, retains the old hierarchical structure and thus gives it a new lease on its power and persuasion.⁹ In other words, there is a hidden exclusivism within pluralism. Only particular forms of religious expression are incorporated into the pluralist agenda – namely those that have been sufficiently transformed to Protestant standards and definitions of “the religious.”

Most importantly, this further crystallizes the false construction that religion is a natural, transcultural, and transhistorical phenomenon. I am not arguing that there is no such thing as “religion.” Rather, I am arguing that the category of religion has been politically constructed in response to particular Protestant theological questions. The problem is that such constructions are largely incapable of accounting for a wide range of religiosity that falls outside the purview of a set of post-Enlightenment Protestant assumptions about the religious and the secular. Moreover, secularization theorists and social surveyors also rely upon such constructions of the category of religion. They too believe that religion can effectively and responsibly be located and

⁶ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), xi, 228-230.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁹ Ibid.

measured over time and across cultures. One major problem with this is that it largely ignores the particularities of a variety of potential religious practices and expressions in favor of broad, universal categories that emphasize religious belief. In other words, such constructed categories are unable to incorporate and make sense of real difference. Masuzawa explains that when we resign to the logic of religious studies we are subscribing to certain configurations of power that are still present in our contemporary discourses, whether we are aware of them or not.¹⁰

The point, again, is not that religion does not exist; the point is that it exists in various, mutually incompatible forms. The problem is that secularization theorists rely upon a broad, general category of religion and they purport to locate, measure, and represent this single phenomenon. Theories of secularization, I am arguing, continue to perpetuate this construction while also divorcing it from questions of power. The various ideologies that are infused into the categories of the religious and the secular are ignored in favor of decontextualized constructions that serve the purposes of the larger argument. In other words, the category of religion remains *useful*. One of its uses is that it effectively distracts the observer in her observation and analysis. Later, I will argue that when secularization theorists use particular constructions of the category of religion, especially when presented as natural, universal, and neutral, it effectively obfuscates any political arguments that may be present while failing to account for a variety of otherwise religious expressions and practices.

Despite this – or perhaps *because* of this - the categories of “the religious” and “the secular” have largely been treated as natural phenomena that are assumed to exist in more or less the same form throughout history and across cultures. The genealogical investigations I engage with in chapter 3 argue that the distinctions between the religious and the secular are not only

¹⁰ Ibid., 17-21.

culturally constructed, but also ideologically specific. These categories, in other words, do not describe divisions that naturally exist in the world; rather, there is moral and political weight attached to these classifications, which require critical investigation. However, once these categories have been set into motion, they begin to take on a life of their own. That is to say, revealing such constructions does not take away from the fact that these concepts are nonetheless *real*. To assume that they are *natural*, however, is an altogether different (and I argue, problematic) position. It is not my intention, therefore, to eliminate the categories altogether.

Furthermore, the genealogical investigations I explore in this chapter demonstrate various ways in which minority communities (especially those whose religious self-identities are unconventional) become further marginalized by these constructions. In short, prominent definitions of religion are either incapable of representing a variety of populations,¹¹ or they have one of two other damaging effects: they either force already marginalized communities to reimagine their own religious identities to conform to more traditional definitions¹² or their religious identities are reimagined for them.¹³ This is what I mean when I say that certain forms of power are being authorized in the reproduction of the categories of the religious and the secular. The definer is defining more than a seemingly benign term; such definitions not only determine who is included and excluded but they also reestablish a set of problematic binaries, which ultimately favor those in power. The following examples of genealogical investigations

¹¹ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 138-139. For example, Sullivan argues that prominent legal definitions of religion exclude the most common forms of American religiosity. I explore her argument in more detail in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

¹² Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5. This is the point Tisa Wenger makes with the Pueblo fight for legal religious status in the 1920s.

¹³ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 121-145.

into the category of “the religious” are provided as evidence to this point; they demonstrate the dimensions of power that remain involved in its use. Again, there is political and moral weight attached to the reproduction of the category, especially when such reproductions are done without questioning the ideological constructions that lie within.

One problem is that when the category of the religious is taken for granted – when it is treated as naturally and universally existent – it distorts or ignores those traditions and beliefs that fall outside of its stated boundaries. It functions to further legitimize *particular* inscriptions as universal ideals without adequately accounting for the contested nature of the category itself. It is these forms of power that are covertly authorized in the continued unquestioned use of the categories of the religious and the secular. One explicit example of the power dimensions infused into the category of the religious can be found in David Chidester’s book *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, where he demonstrates the ways in which religion was defined by the colonizers in order to retain control over colonized peoples in Southern Africa.¹⁴ He explains that “comparative religion” was not only done in the offices of metropolitan universities by scholars; the category of religion was also constructed and reconstructed on the battlefield of European-African conflict.¹⁵ We quickly learn that there is nothing natural about the way religion is defined. In brief, Chidester explains that European definitions of religion depended upon colonial domination.¹⁶ Definitions, in other words, have historically been constructed to demarcate political insiders from outsiders.

¹⁴ David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 219.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Tisa Wenger's recent work, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*, also brings into focus this notion that definitions of religion often play a key role in political struggles determining insiders and outsiders.¹⁷ The point here is not that these definitions are constructed in the same exact manner as the definitions I explore in secularization theories; rather, the point is to demonstrate that definitions of religion are often manipulated for political purposes and have grave moral consequences for those whom are subject to such definitions. Put briefly, Wenger tells the story of a 1920s controversy involving Pueblo Indians and the U.S. government, wherein questions of religious freedom and political rights faced unprecedented challenges. The Pueblo Indians of New Mexico regularly participated in a ritual dance that the U.S. government did not condone; in fact, the Bureau of Indian Affairs actively suppressed and banned the dance because it was understood to be "immoral," "degrading," and "savage."¹⁸ Desperate to defend their sacred dance, the Pueblo Indians claimed that it was a religious practice with the hope to acquire constitutional protection under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. What followed was a struggle for power, which focused on definitions of religion. In the end, Wenger explains, "the redefinition of the ceremonies as 'religion' subtly undermined the communal and holistic ideals of that tradition."¹⁹ It forced an already marginalized community to reimagine their own religious identity in order to conform to definition of those in power. The category of religion, in other words, is not simply a descriptive category that various communities either fit, or do not fit, into. It is a category that is being constantly shaped to conform to the interests of those doing the defining.

¹⁷ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 237-252.

¹⁸ Ibid., 6-7, 143-145.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

William T. Cavanaugh's, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, provides another useful example of the ethical implications of such categorical constructions.²⁰ Cavanaugh engages directly with the religious-secular dichotomy in order to show the ways in which its reproduction has affected the way we understand (i.e. condemn or condone) certain forms of violence.²¹ This relates to the political debates on the social value of religion that I am seeking to unveil in secularization theory. On the one hand, religion is presented as a fundamental, natural, and universal aspect of human nature. It is socially valuable because it is essentially rational, the source of morality, and beneficial to one's mental and physical health. On the other hand, religion is presented as the remnant of a pre-modern age, which restricts people's ability to flourish in a variety of ways. Religion, in other words, is essentially irrational, uncivilized and pre-modern. Cavanaugh's work, therefore, provides a history of the logics that are being reproduced by secularization theorists. A major goal of my project is to disrupt the categories of the religious and the secular so we, as academics, can also take a distance from complacent academic discourses that have serious ethical implications. The construction of the categories determines the trajectory of the discourse before any serious consideration of the content itself.

Another reason I look extensively at Cavanaugh's work is because he argues, rather convincingly, that assumptions about the transhistorical and transcultural nature of religion has led to the myth that such a phenomenon (religion) could be more prone to violence than its secular counterpart.²² Secondly, he claims that any attempt to say that "there *is* a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a

²⁰ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²¹ Ibid., 51-56.

²² Ibid., 58-64, 69-100.

particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West.”²³ The religious has been constructed as the irrational, private realm of personal beliefs in contradistinction to the rational, public, universal realm of the secular sphere.²⁴ This myth of religious violence is materialized in the Western construction of the “religious other,” who is prone to fanaticism and unwilling to separate religion from politics.²⁵ The point is not to conclude that because religion is a messy concept we ought to conclude that there is no problem of “religion and violence.” Rather, Cavanaugh emphasizes that the “distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying, and it should be avoided altogether.”²⁶ Therefore, instead of searching for what types of violence should be appropriately categorized as religious or secular, we ought to be asking what configurations of power are being authorized by such discourses. In a similar sense, I will *not* be arguing that because the religious and the secular are messy concepts, there is no such thing as secularization or religious revivalism; rather, I am emphasizing that the distinctions made between the two may be more indicative of political configurations than they are about any shift in observed religiosity. In the context of Cavanaugh’s argument, the more important question becomes: What ends are being served when an act of violence is labeled religious instead of “political,” “ethnic,” or “ideological”? I am convinced that much of the more popular scholarship on religion and violence promotes a threatening gap between “us” and “them” by championing the ideals of the modern West as natural and universal at the expense of various non-Western communities and

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Ibid., 4, 13. This construction, however, contains its own hierarchical structure. It identifies Islam as the most offensive religious manifestation of violence and Protestant Christianity as the most secularized, mature form of religion that is resistant to violence.

²⁵ Ibid., 85.

²⁶ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 56.

cultures. In this regard, such genealogical investigations are valuable in that they are able to reveal the constructions within by questioning the natural and universal nature of various categorical distinctions, but also in their ability to disclose configurations of power that function to propel them forward.

I then look to the work of anthropologist Talal Asad, who argues that we must uncover the genealogical construction of the religious and the secular in order to critically engage with the effect of Western “history making.”²⁷ In other words, it is necessary to first identify the systems of power authorized by such definitions before we engage in their use. Because the religious and the secular have largely been presented as natural, universal, and neutral categories (thus depoliticizing their use), we are less equipped to locate the ideological constructions that remain within. The point here is that “universal” definitions of religion that began to emerge in 19th century Europe were actually specifically Protestant in nature; that is, these definitions prove to be particular Christian responses to Protestant theological problems. Definitions are formed within a particular history and out of particular forms of power. However, these particularities are concealed when the category of religion is presented as a universal (transcultural and transhistorical), neutral, and naturally occurring phenomenon. The problem is that the category of religion is *not* universally representative; the category of religion either fails to account for a variety of non-Western identities or it forces them to transform their own logic of self identity to the logic Western scholarship. Claiming that these categories are universally representative resigns the “other,” who is often unfamiliar with such criteria, to a second-class status; their identities are defined in hierarchical relation to those who have done the defining.

²⁷ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 43.

Thus, the “cultural other” is constructed as the *religiously* immature, underdeveloped counterpart to the civilized, mature Western Protestant. Genealogical investigations into the religious and the secular reveal that the definitions employed in secularization theories say less about the populations in question and more about the state of Western anthropology and sociology.

Following this, I aim to achieve two goals. First, I will demonstrate the ways in which the categories of the religious and the secular are not neutral categories distinguishing naturally distinctive phenomena. They are the products of particular historical and ideological constructions. Second, I argue that the categories of the religious and the secular contain an ethical dimension that is obfuscated by their claims to neutrality and universality. That is, the religious-secular dichotomy continues to authorize constructs of power that are deeply engrained into the terminologies themselves. The religious and the secular, in other words, are not benign anthropological taxonomies; they have been constructed quite narrowly to serve the interests of those in power – namely, those doing the defining.

At this point, I shift my attention to discourses on secularization. It is my contention that prominent theories of secularization continue to treat the category of religion as a neutral and universal category, thus compromising their sociological claims. Presenting the religious in such a fashion empowers the sociologist to hide behind claims of objectivity. If the religious and the secular (the two poles of the secularization thesis) are presented as neutral descriptors of natural, universal phenomena, then the sociologist is said to be engaging in *observation* rather than argumentation. However, once this myth is debunked, the sociologist is presented with a new set of questions. How can one effectively measure the increase or decrease of religion when the very category itself is so variously understood? If the category of religion is fundamentally Protestant in origin, are sociological surveys on secularization and religiosity actually measuring levels of

Protestantism rather than religiosity? If so, what do we make of surveys that include non-Protestant responses in their measurement of religiosity? Do the criteria/questions themselves (e.g. Do you believe in God? How often do you pray? How often do you attend church?) favor traditional religious orthodoxy?²⁸ And if so, is it appropriate for sociological theorists to make claims about religion in general? Furthermore, what are the possible effects of making such claims? In chapter four, I will directly engage some of the leading secularization theories in order to explore these types of questions. It is not my intention to debunk the secularization thesis in order to argue that levels of religiosity have either sustained or increased over a particular period of time. Rather, I will be arguing that conclusions offered by secularization theorists are compromised because the very categories themselves, which are the basis for such conclusions, are not neutral, universal, transhistorical, or transcultural. Again, I am not arguing that religion does not exist. I am arguing that the perpetuation of the assumption that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon that universally exists in more-or-less the same fashion is a myth. The complexity and variability of religious expression extends well beyond the boundaries that have been set.

This following section will directly engage various secularization theories and the responses they have engendered. There is a particular discourse within the sociology of religion that seeks to either prove or disprove the “secularization thesis” or “secularization paradigm.” In short, the secularization thesis is the argument that religious beliefs and institutions have steadily lost their authority and influence in the modern world. In chapter 4 I will demonstrate the ways

²⁸ Alan Cooperman, Gregory A. Smith, and Stefan S. Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious: Modest Drops in Overall Rates of Belief and Practice, but Religiously Affiliated Americans are as Observant as Before* (Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, 2015), 7.

in which such decline and increase models cannot adequately prove their claims because they treat the category of religion as a transcultural, transhistorical, neutral, and natural phenomena. I will begin with a brief exposition of Peter Berger's classic work, *The Sacred Canopy*.²⁹ First published in 1967, it is widely considered the first social-scientific theory of secularization. While Peter Berger later recants many of the arguments he made in *The Sacred Canopy*, it nonetheless had great influence upon theories of secularization that immediately followed.³⁰ In short, Berger argues that religious institutions and ideas become less plausible in the modern world due to a process of post-Enlightenment socialization.³¹ These religious institutions and ideas are tied to the irrational and the supernatural.³² Berger argues that with the rise of modernization and the Enlightenment's focus on reason, the enchanted world of the religious has undergone a significant and steady decline. That is, exercises in post-Enlightenment Protestant theology displaced the enchanted world of the Catholic Church.³³ What is being displaced, I argue, is not necessarily a universal phenomenon called religion, but rather a particular construction of the religious that focuses on the irrational and the supernatural. It was only a matter of time, Berger explains, that Protestantism would turn on itself, further advancing the reach of secularism.³⁴ In other words, the sacred had been reduced from a fully enchanted (Catholic) worldview to a narrower conception of "God's grace," which is a particularly Protestant notion of the sacred.³⁵ The advent of pluralism in the modern world introduces a

²⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

³⁰ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 134-137.

³¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 26-28.

³² Ibid., 60-63, 146-151.

³³ Ibid., 110-124.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 112-113.

variety of new religious options, which function to “relativize” Protestantism’s claim to universality.³⁶ This, in turn, leads to sharp religious decline. Protestant answers to questions of theodicy and death become less plausible and less rational. Therefore, in his assessment, Berger reinforces the notion that the religious is tied to the irrational, the savage, and the uncivilized human. Religion is the “sheltering canopy” that protects men from “howling like animals.”³⁷ Though Berger later distances himself from these claims, they nonetheless establish a particular logic of the religious which is retained in later contributions to secularization theory.

In his book, *Secularization*, Steve Bruce also defends the secularization thesis. He argues that religious beliefs and institutions have steadily lost their authority and influence in the modern world.³⁸ He explains that this trend is not inevitable, but that it is irreversible. In other words, modernity does not imply secularization, but when secularization occurs, its effects are permanent.³⁹ Bruce agrees with Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, whose theories are presented in the following chapter, that modernity has led to an increase in religious diversity; however, instead of leading to a vibrant religious marketplace that encourages innovation, Bruce argues that the modern pluralist nation-state relativizes religious explanations.

I will argue that Bruce relies upon a narrow, Protestant definition of the religious in his theory of secularization. According to Bruce, religion is most properly defined as the beliefs and practices related to supernatural powers with agency (gods) as well as moral systems that can affect human affairs.⁴⁰ Therefore, when he argues that (a) secularization has occurred and (b) that

³⁶ Ibid., 151.

³⁷ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 55.

³⁸ Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 201.

³⁹ Ibid., 156-171.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.

its effects are irreversible, he relies upon a particular *kind* of religiosity – the kind that appears to be evaporating.⁴¹ These measures do not account for non-traditional, non-cognitive, privatized religious identities. In Bruce’s scheme, religious expressions that are public, belief-centered, and intellectual are considered to be *more* religious. When expressions become privatized and less dependent upon cognitive intellectual positions (e.g. supernatural beliefs, the existence of a metaphysical God or moral system), they are deemed to be more secular.

Bruce also uses a similar definition in his earlier book, *God is Dead*.⁴² However, in this work he focuses much of his efforts comparing modern levels of religiosity in Great Britain to those of the 1850s and medieval Europe. Many have criticized him for this, arguing that he is not accounting for the ways in which religious expression changes over time. For example, Grace Davie argues that religious change is often misunderstood as religious decline. Where Bruce relies on data that demonstrates a decline in church membership and other forms of traditional religious activity to forward his secularization thesis, Davie argues that people are no less religious than they were 150 years ago. They are simply “believing without belonging.”⁴³ That is, people are relating less to institutionalized forms of religion in favor of less conventional religious association. This will bring us to the second portion of secularization theories – those theories that seek to account for the evolution of religious identity in order to disrupt conclusions drawn in these prominent (decline-increase) theories of secularization. In addition to Davie’s

⁴¹ Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of an Illusion*, 1-2. They also argue that any definition of “the religious” must include the supernatural; however, they explain that the recent decline in traditional supernatural beliefs will be followed by a resurgence in religious innovation.

⁴² Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002).

⁴³ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), xxi.

criticisms, I briefly explore Thomas Luckmann's contributions. In short, he argues that while public expressions of religion seem to have declined, privatized "invisible" religion has remained present in our world.⁴⁴ We will see that sociologist José Casanova disagrees. In contrast to Luckmann's conclusions, Casanova argues that that religion is not becoming increasingly marginalized and privatized over time. Rather, he concludes that there is a significant trend of the deprivatization of religion occurring in the modern world.⁴⁵ While I agree with many aspects of the arguments offered in this section, I conclude that each of them believes that the secularization thesis can be salvaged. Davie and Luckmann argue that such theories must account for non-traditional forms of religion that change over time. While I agree with each of them that many forms of religion have been ignored by secularization theorists, I ultimately conclude that – due to its inherently multitudinous, messy, inconsistent, and complex nature – efforts to observe and measure "it" over time and across cultures become exceedingly difficult. Casanova also argues that the secularization thesis can be saved or improved upon if it purges the ethnocentric prejudices engrained in the category of religion itself.⁴⁶ I argue that in order to improve or save the secularization thesis, assumptions about the transcultural, transhistorical, and universal nature of religion must be expelled from academic analysis.

I will then shift focus to a number of theorists who have responded to decline-model theories of secularization by arguing the opposite: religion has not been declining over time; rather, religiosity has either sustained or increased over time. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge offer such a rebuttal to the secularization thesis, where they argue that claims of

⁴⁴ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), 96-97.

⁴⁵ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

religious decline are ultimately untenable.⁴⁷ They argue that in response to trends in secularization come instances of religious revivalism and innovation. While they concede that the content of religion is always changing, there is no evidence of religious decline.⁴⁸ In this sense, they argue that the *amount* of religion has remained relatively constant. However, while they claim to accept the notion that religion is constantly changing (because they must account for the shift in data), they too rely upon a narrow, Western, Protestant definition of religion. Stark and Bainbridge admit that when non-traditional forms of religion are accounted for, it becomes too difficult to distinguish religion from non-religion, or the religious from the secular.⁴⁹ This leads to their economic theory of secularization, which is only capable of measuring Western, Protestant forms of religiosity. They focus on individual beliefs on afterlife, as well as cosmic rewards and punishments. That is, Stark and Bainbridge argue that humans naturally seek rewards that are unobtainable, such as escape from death.⁵⁰ Because these rewards are unobtainable, humans will create and exchange “compensators” for that which they cannot obtain in this life.⁵¹ This, they argue, is what makes religion universal and fundamental to humanity. However, the entire enterprise of religion is reduced to the logic of Protestantism. While Stark and Bainbridge purport to be making arguments about the existence of religion in general, their theory is largely confined to Protestant forms of religious expression. This is not to

⁴⁷ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 1-5. Note: They are responding in part to Berger’s thesis in *The Sacred Canopy*; however, they are also responding to a more general post-Enlightenment attitude in the social sciences that has repeatedly predicted the end of religion in the modern era.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

⁵¹ Ibid. A compensator is the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some other context which cannot be immediately verified.

say that they are *only* measuring the existence of Protestantism. They are also locating a variety of traditions insofar as they sufficiently subscribe to Protestant criteria of what constitutes the religious.

In their book, *Acts of Faith*, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke engage what they call the “old paradigm” of social scientific research, which they claim relies upon a post-Enlightenment critique of religion.⁵² That is, the old paradigm assumes that the central claims of religion essentially are false and that religion does harm to those who “believe” because it is in direct conflict with reason.⁵³ In the old paradigm, religion is understood as a phenomenon that will inevitably be overcome by science and reason. In the face of these claims, Stark and Finke point out that not only has religion *not* disappeared; it is stronger than ever. Religion has survived, they argue, because it is a primary and universal human phenomenon.⁵⁴ It is not, as the old paradigm argues, secondary. That is, religion is not a projection of human ideas, a response to fear, or a reflection of our desires. Religion is fundamental to the human condition. In short, Stark and Finke treat religion as a transhistorical, transcultural, universal phenomenon that can be observed and measured over time and across cultures.

Much like Stark’s earlier work with Bainbridge, Stark and Finke devise a religious-economy theory of religiosity.⁵⁵ They argue that with increased levels of pluralism and religious diversity, people are presented with more religious choices, which leads to a more vibrant religious marketplace. In turn, this engenders religious innovation, which results in higher levels of religiosity (though more variant, which is why, they argue, some studies fail to capture

⁵² Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 28-31.

⁵³ Note the conflation of “belief” and “religious.”

⁵⁴ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 85-113.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

instances of religious revivalism).⁵⁶ Their entire theory, however, relies on this notion that there is sui generis category of religion – the genus - that is expressed through a variety of species, or religions. Religious diversity is understood as the diversity of cultural expression of the same universal, human phenomenon. Again, the problem with this is twofold: first, it does not recognize non-traditional religious identities; second, it forces “the other” to translate or transform her own identity into the dominant (Protestant) construction of the religious in order to receive recognition.⁵⁷

With these criticisms in mind, I move to the final chapter where I explore the ways in which ignoring the genealogical constructions of the the religious and the secular continues to affect discourses on secularization. I begin with a brief analysis of a 2014 Pew Research survey on the American religious landscape. In short, the analysis of the survey concludes that the U.S. public is becoming less religious over time.⁵⁸ I argue that this survey (as well as others) rely upon a narrow, Western, and Protestant set of criteria to inform the category of religion and are thus incapable of locating and measuring various forms of religion. Much of the data that secularization theorists rely upon are found in such social scientific surveys.

Lastly, I propose a final call to those contributing to secularization discourses; such sociological analyses must account for the constructed nature of the categories of the religious and the secular. Not only is it necessary to become aware of the power dimensions inscribed into these categories, theorists must also allow such findings to affect the theoretical and sociological methodologies employed in theories of secularization. This is where I turn to a burgeoning field

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁷ This recognition extends beyond surveys and other social-scientific research; the same paradigm is used in appeals for religious freedom, for instance.

⁵⁸ Cooperman, Smith, and Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 1, 3-7.

within sociology that actively engages (instead of ignoring) the complexity of the categories of the religious and the secular. Here, I utilize the work of sociologist Meredith McGuire, who focuses on the particularity and diversity of individuals' religious beliefs in order to expose the shortcomings of standard typological notions of religion employed in the sociological study of religion.⁵⁹ She urges scholars – and sociologists in particular – to begin with individuals, rather than categories, when attempting to understand religion. Sociologists and secularization theorists continue to start with broad categories, which (inappropriately) shape the subject before she is investigated. This is because the standard typological categories and definitions are too rigid; they are unable to mould to the shape of the individuals in question and thus become largely non-representative.⁶⁰ Anthropology and sociology rely upon a universal category of religion in order to engage in proper discovery, observation, and analysis. However, because secularization theorists continue to ignore, for the most part, such considerations, she highly doubts the accuracy and efficacy of the majority of scholarship in sociology of religion.⁶¹ In agreement with Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, a scholar of religion and law, McGuire explains that “lived religion” and “folk religion” do not fit easily into traditional, familiar religious structures.⁶² This might be less of a problem for sociology if such religious identities were uncommon. However, both Sullivan and McGuire explain that these non-traditional forms of religion – lived religion, folk religion, or individual religion - are *distinctly* American.⁶³ That is, the types of religion that are

⁵⁹ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-5.

⁶⁰ McGuire agrees with Talal Asad when he says that the categories of the religious and the secular imply a dichotomous pair of transhistorical, transcultural phenomena.

⁶¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶³ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, 10.

falling through the cracks, so to speak, are the most prominent forms of religion in the United States.

In short, McGuire argues that the field of sociology has predominantly adopted a Protestant Reformation conception of religion that privileges belief over practice.⁶⁴ Sociologists are affecting the way data is collected and interpreted when the categories are taken for granted. The secularization theorists I have canvassed are thus either engaging in anachronism or its opposite, projection and invention. By projection and invention, I mean the act of utilizing older categories to interpret incongruent contemporary landscapes. The point is that sociology – with particular regard to theories of secularization - is not doing the work it purports to be doing. Theorists and surveyors are not engaging in neutral observation and interpretation. Furthermore, in understanding the constructed nature of these categories we become equipped to challenge the forms of power being authorized in their use. A complacency has developed in debates on secularization, one that has become detrimentally accustomed to the *particular* definitions offered through history by the privileged and powerful classes that engaged in theology, who were able to attend church regularly, and who took part in traditional rituals. This is *an* orientation to religion that is neither transhistorical or transcultural, and finds no commonplace in the modern Western world. If we continue to ignore this history and the problems engrained in the genealogical construction of the categories of the religious and the secular, we will continue to promote a non-representative discourse that is incapable of achieving the very goals it sets for itself.

To summarize, this project argues that scholars of religion – including secularization theorists – ought to abandon the assumption that there is a transhistorical and transcultural

⁶⁴ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 20-21.

phenomenon of religion that is neutrally discoverable and universally expressive. That is, while religion may exist throughout the world, efforts to locate, study, and measure it become inherently problematic and largely non-representative. We see that scholars of religion have passively adopted constructions of the religious and the secular as widely representative, which functions to further marginalize non-traditional, non-Western, non-orthodox religious expressions and practices. Second, this project agrees with William Cavanaugh when he writes that any attempt “to say that there *is* a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West.”⁶⁵ He was making this argument with specific reference to religion-and-violence arguments; however, the same logic applies to theories of secularization. In this context, two prominent positions have prevailed, both of which I suggest could be masking a number of political arguments about the social value of religion under the guise of social-scientific research. That is, the universal and neutral presentation of the categories of the religious and the secular may function to obfuscate a variety of political motivations. Therefore, the very act of assigning particular definitions of the religious and the secular is to engage in politics prior to any collection or analysis of “data.” This is because the data itself is entirely dependent upon the particularity of the construction and presentation of these categories. To ignore the power of defining is to ignore the most pressing configuration of power present in theories of secularization.

The point is not that there is no such thing as religion. I am not arguing that certain phenomena classically associated with religion cannot be measured. Surely, sociologists are able to measure whether or not *particular* beliefs or actions have declined or increased over a given

⁶⁵ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 9.

period of time. For instance, a social-scientific survey can, at least in theory, draw coherent conclusions on the question of whether or not fewer Americans believe in the physical resurrection of Christ today when compared to, say, 1950 (assuming such a question was posed in 1950). Similarly, sociologists can (more or less) accurately measure the decline or increase of church membership within a specific denomination. They can draw coherent conclusion about the number of Catholics who receive weekly Communion and whether or not this has changed over time. However, to argue that the results of any of these studies, or any combination of these studies, conclude that Americans are “more” or “less” religious implies a hierarchy of religious orthodoxy and functions to conceal acts of defining, and thus the power that is authorized by such inscriptions.

Therefore, I am arguing that such social-scientific research actually tells us more about the surveyor(s) than the surveyed. On the one hand, there are those who challenge the secularization thesis by arguing that religion has either remained constant or undergone a surge of revivalism. These theories, I argue, are also making a deeper political argument about the social value of religion. However, they have a particular kind of religion in mind – loosely, Protestant Christianity. For example, Stark and Finke understand religion to be a fundamental aspect of human nature, which they define as an essentially rational system of beliefs and choices (hence their rational economic model of secularization). Moreover, they explain that religion cultivates better mental and physical health.⁶⁶ That is, religion is a net force of good in the world. Accordingly, the category of religion they employ reflects and projects the particular construction needed to advance this argument. However, presenting a particular definition of religion under the guise of neutrality (religion is universal, transhistorical, transcultural)

⁶⁶ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 31-32.

removes, at least on the surface, the definer from the definition. Thus, the project is perceived to be observational rather than political.

On the other hand, there are those who defend the secularization thesis by employing their own particular definition of religion. Their religion is presented as the remnant of an older, more superstitious and irrational age. Therefore, the category of religion reflects and projects this particular construction and political position. For example, Steve Bruce explicitly and repeatedly states that he is *not* arguing that secularization is the inevitable and logical result of modernization.⁶⁷ However, the definition of religion that he creates and uses as the primary analytic tool for his interpretations is shaped by one dominant criterion: a *belief in the supernatural*, whichever “form” that may take (be it “God,” “gods,” “karma,” or “spirits”).⁶⁸ It is for these reasons that his data demonstrates decline. As modern societies reject supernatural beliefs (as well as other forms of religious expression), Bruce interprets this as religious decline. Again, the point is not to say that Bruce’s data does *not* demonstrate some sort of decline; rather, the point is that we must take into account an additional set of questions when analyzing such social scientific research. To what extent does Bruce’s definition of religion imply a conclusion that functions to support a deeper political argument – one that expresses the *preference* for a modern rational public identity over a religious identity steeped in supernaturalism, pre-modern rituals, and hierarchical structures? That is, Bruce’s apparently neutral presentation of the categories of the religious and the secular itself implies a preference for modernity at the expense of a particularly outdated type of religious expression.

⁶⁷ Bruce, *Secularization*, 4, 56.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

I conclude this dissertation with a final call to those sociologists, philosophers, and other theorists still contributing to the various discourses on secularization. Research and analysis pertaining to “secularization” must begin to account for the constructed nature of the categories of the religious and the secular. It is imperative to engage forms of power that are being authorized in such discourses so they can be accounted for and contested. I am not arguing that this should put an end to sociological research relating to religion and secularity. Rather, researchers ought to heed the advice of those like Elizabeth Shakman Hurd by *particularize* both the aims and methodologies employed.⁶⁹ Let us not forget the most basic axiom of sociology, which was first articulated by one of its early fathers, Emile Durkheim: in order to be considered a *science*, sociology must have a *specific* object of study.⁷⁰ This basic truth – the law of specificity - I am arguing, has been compromised in contemporary debates on secularization. Instead, secularization theorists have relied upon the broad, general categories of the religious and the secular, thus concealing potential political arguments that exist underneath the data. This is a call to elevate such political arguments by bringing them to the fore so that they can be more fully and intentionally engaged. As it currently stands, they remain lurking behind the auspices of “neutral” sociological research. We may not be able to answer whether or not “religion” is declining or advancing over time, but we might be more equipped to understand why many of us continue to care.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 147-153.

⁷⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method: And Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method*, ed Steven Lukes (New York: Free Press, 2014), xxxi, 6, 18-19.

CHAPTER 2:

A POST-ENLIGHTENMENT PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION

Modern secularization discourses are rooted in a broader Enlightenment narrative that is both responsible for constructing a particular category of religion and (more than often) critiquing the content of that category: religion. Some of the earliest versions of the secularization thesis were offered by a number of Enlightenment thinkers, both political theorists and philosophers. Political theorists Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have each articulated the role of religion in an increasingly modern, rational, and “civilized” world. Their works mark the early separation of the public political sphere from the newly forming private religious sphere. It is for this reason that it is important to trace the development of their respective contributions to social contract theory. Many of the sociological studies I engage in later chapters assume many of the points first introduced by these social contract theorists, most notably the supposed natural distinction between the public secular sphere and the private religious sphere. In addition to this, social contract theorists and a number of Enlightenment philosophers – most notably David Hume – further engage the content of the religious sphere by supplying a number of intellectual criticisms of religion. Many of the criticisms and assumptions offered by these Enlightenment political theorists and philosophers were further advanced by later philosophers and other academics (namely anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, and psychologists), such as E.B. Tylor, James Frazer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud. Later in this dissertation, we will see that many of these early Enlightenment assumptions about religion have been recapitulated in the works of many contemporary sociologists of religion, such as Peter Berger and Steve

Bruce, and have also remained to be the foundational content for critics such as Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, and Roger Finke.⁷¹

Social Contract Theorists: A Public-Private Distinction

Before delving into the contributions of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, it is important to note the impact of the Peace of Westphalia. In short, the Peace of Westphalia was a treaty among European settlements⁷² that was negotiated between 1644 and 1648, which resulted in the creation of a number of independent sovereign states. Many scholars date the birth of the “modern nation state” to the signing of this treaty, as it effectively challenged many of the monarchical and theological assumptions that preceded it while also leading to a body of philosophical discourse on state sovereignty, justice, and law. A feature of this discourse that I highlight is the formation of the twin categories of the religious and the secular and the ways in which the particular construction of these categories contain secularizing assumptions.⁷³

Thomas Hobbes published his most influential work, *Leviathan*, just three years after the Peace of Westphalia is signed. He is by no means the earliest critic of religion, nor is he the loudest critic we will hear in this dissertation. However, his philosophical contributions can hardly be overstated as they lead to a long tradition of political theory that helps to construct a category of religion that has long been assumed in a number of related disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy.⁷⁴ Hobbes is best known for his early

⁷¹ I will also be looking at a number of other contributors to this conversation, such as Thomas Luckman, Grace Davie, and José Casanova.

⁷² The majority of these settlements were comprised of rulers and subjects of the Holy Roman Empire, including German, Swedish, and French representation.

⁷³ I will spend more time on the genealogical construction of this category in chapter 3.

development of what eventually comes to be known as “social contract theory,” which is an articulation of the ideal political principles of a society made up of free, rational individuals.⁷⁵ He concedes that a government is not necessary to all societies, but he argues that it is preferred over what I will refer to as the “state of nature,” and which Hobbes calls the “laws of nature.”⁷⁶ In the state of nature, humans are left completely free; no coercive laws or policies will impede the will of individuals. The laws of nature dictate, above all else, the ideal of preservation. Humans, left to themselves, will seek protection in the form of self-preservation. This, Hobbes explains, leads quickly to chaos. When there is no institutionalized system of justice – no government – then judgment and action falls to the individual. This inevitably leads to civil war, where humans live in a “brutish manner” and violently engage each other for reasons of personal security and gain. Hobbes explains that this is the:

dissolute condition of masterless men without subjection to laws and a coercive power to tie their hands from rapine and revenge: nor considering that the greatest pressure of sovereign governors proceedeth, not from any delight or profit they can expect in the damage weakening of their subjects, in whose vigour consisteth their own strength and glory, but in the restiveness of themselves that, unwillingly contributing to their own defence.⁷⁷

Here we see the early formation of a distinction traced throughout this dissertation: between the civilized, rational person and the brutish, uncivilized, irrational individual. This is what the “civilized” person seeks to correct or avoid when she engages in a social contract.

As a reminder, I am recounting a brief history of western liberal political theory in order to trace the roots of secularization theory. So, let us look briefly at Hobbes’s portrayal of religion

⁷⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed by A. R. Waller (London: Cambridge University Press, 1904).

⁷⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 128.

before moving on to the subsequent works of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Whether we agree or disagree with the content of their respective theories is of lesser concern at this point. What is important is the impact such works have on later philosophical and social theories of religion, including sociological studies of secularization. Hobbes assumes that religion is a human construction. He writes, “Seeing there are no signs nor fruit of religion but in man only, there is no cause to doubt but that the seed of religion is also only in man; and consisteth in some peculiar quality, or at least in some eminent degree thereof, not to be found in other living creatures.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, all three of these Enlightenment philosophers treat religion as a distinct aspect of society that can be differentiated from other aspects of society. Stark and Finke explain that, despite self-identifying as a Christian (which, to say the least, was the convention at the time), Hobbes dismisses religion as being full of ignorance and lies.⁷⁹ For Hobbes, the gods only exist in the minds of the believers. The foundational governmental principles, or what Hobbes calls the “rights of sovereign power,” ought to be derived from nature alone and not from any religious or theological point of view. He writes,

“I have derived the rights of sovereign power, and the duty of subjects, hitherto from the principles of nature only; such as experience has found true, or consent concerning the use of words has made so; that is to say, from the nature of men, known to us by experience, and from definitions, of such words as are essential to all political reasoning, universally agreed on.”⁸⁰

Hobbes is not saying that religion is obsolete or has no purpose; rather, he is saying that the political sphere is a distinct sphere of its own and it should be free of religious influence. Later, he notes that the mysteries of religion ought to be respected and preserved, but that they are wholly *individual*. He writes,

⁷⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 1-2.

⁸⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 269.

When God speaketh to man, it must be either immediately or by mediation of another man, to whom He had formerly spoken by Himself immediately. How God speaketh to a man immediately may be understood by those well enough to whom He hath so spoken; but how the same should be understood by another is hard, if not impossible, to know. For if a man pretend to me that God hath spoken to him supernaturally, and immediately, and I make doubt of it, I cannot easily perceive what argument he can produce to oblige me to believe it. It is true that if he be my sovereign, he may oblige me to obedience, so as not by act or word to declare I believe him not; but not to think any otherwise than my reason persuades me. But if one that hath not such authority over me shall pretend the same, there is nothing that exacteth either belief or obedience.⁸¹

Because political philosophy addresses the entire community and seeks to articulate the coercive power that is applied to the public, it is essential that such theories rely upon reason derived from experiences of the natural world, which are shared and are not conclusions drawn from the supernatural sphere of individual religious experience.

John Locke further engages many of these points and he is widely considered one of the most influential social contract theorists. Consistent in many ways with Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Locke's "Second Treatise on Government" engages a variety of topics relating to sovereignty, government, rights, and political power. He most famously argues that rights to life, liberty, and property are *natural* rights that are independent from any specific laws or society and that when people do come together in a society, these natural rights are affected by the communal responsibility or duty entailed by living in a civil society.⁸²

It is perhaps best to start with a discussion of the "state of nature." Here, Locke is talking about the natural state of man (or humans) as a hypothetical⁸³ state of man outside of a society or

⁸¹ Ibid., 270.

⁸² John Locke, *Two Treatise on Civil Government* (London & New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1884), 192-199.

⁸³ Whether or not humans ever lived in this "state of nature" remains up for debate; however, Locke's political-philosophical contributions do not depend upon such historical reality.

a nation with a government. Man⁸⁴, in his most natural state, has an inherent sense of moral truth. This refutes the notion that all rights, moral and otherwise, derive from a divine source. Locke is forwarding a theory of civilization and rights that refutes the “divine-right” theory that was prominent until his time, thus contributing to the dislocation of the once mutually bound secular and religious spheres. Locke’s theory states that not only are moral truths natural to man, but also that political rights and rule of law are created by man. Before discussing these, however, let me say a few more words about what he says about the rights of man in the state of nature in order to distinguish it from the rights he discusses in a civil society.

The state of nature is one where human instincts of self-preservation are prevalent and there is no institution of power overseeing human action and interaction. This inevitably leads to disproportionate access to power and security; the stronger and more intelligent are likely able to enforce some forms of power over the weaker and less intelligent. Locke’s point, I take it, is that in the state of nature there is no organized political power to which the people must answer. People do as they must in order to survive. Within the state of nature there are only “natural laws,” which are universal. As there are certain moral truths that are natural to all people, certain infractions are universally punishable. Locke explains that everyone is in a state of nature until (or unless) there becomes a political society. It is within this political society that we sacrifice some of our natural rights in favor of the securities and protections that come with being a member of a civil society. (We can think here of Michael Walzer’s first social good that he discusses: “membership”; all other social goods are predicated on the notion that the person is a

⁸⁴ I continue using his male-gendered assumptions when referring to humans in order to preserve a sense of continuity when referencing particular passages from his work.

member of a civil or political society; this is how they become beneficiaries of these goods).⁸⁵

The transformation from the state of nature to a political society is a transformation in the rights one naturally has to the rules and laws one commits to for the various benefits a society of rules and laws brings.

Locke discusses this in his chapters on “slavery” and “war.”⁸⁶ He explains that in the state of nature, man is only ruled by the natural laws; he answers only to the moral truths that are reached by proper reason and which are engrained in natural law. That is, natural law, which is first and foremost concerned with survival or self-preservation, dictates by reason that in order to survive it would only be considered “just” to kill another person under the circumstance of self-defense. In the state of nature, people do live together, but not under a common authority, such as a government. Therefore, reason dictates the rules of association or what we might call morality. I will not kill you and you will not kill me because we both want to survive and hold securely to all of our natural freedoms. If one person is attacking another or threatening his/her freedoms, then that person has the right to use force in order to retain that freedom (of life, liberty, and even property). Locke tells us that many people enter a society, or *remain* within a political society, because it offers security and protection from the threat of killing or taking one’s freedoms. People are willing to consent themselves to the power of the government or the rule of the majority, thus sacrificing some natural rights for the protections that society affords.⁸⁷

What, though, is this civil society and how does it function? Locke explains that it is a combination of multiple individuals who have all agreed to consent to an organized form of

⁸⁵ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 31-61.

⁸⁶ Locke, *Two Treatise on Civil Government*, 199-203.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 199-220.

power that is designed to govern in a way that will lead to the mutual benefit of those involved.⁸⁸ This is the heart of social contract theory. People come together to create a system that gives power to an apparatus to enforce an agreed-upon set of laws or rules that are meant to benefit society as a whole. When this power and these laws are decided by a majority of the people, we see the development of liberal democratic theory. However, there is nothing in Locke's political philosophy that necessarily entails democracy. People can come together and consent to a monarchical rule or an oligarchic rule; the point is that in social contract theory, people decide to live in a society over a state of nature, thereby giving up some of their natural rights, in order to benefit from society.⁸⁹ Locke does point out that very few people, however, "decide" to enter into such a society. The majority of citizens are born into a civilization. Locke does say that any portion of the society that the person takes issue with is able to be challenged; so, it is not as if people are born into a society where certain restraints are placed on them and they have absolutely no choice to challenge them. When the state is no longer satisfying the demands of the people, it may be challenged and even replaced.

Lastly, I'll briefly talk about the difference between what Locke calls "paternal power" and "political power."⁹⁰ This should put much of what I have already said into context and lead well into Rousseau's contributions to this discussion, which more explicitly outline the role of religion. Locke discusses the difference between paternal power and political power in order to demonstrate the role of reason in his political philosophy. It is this aspect of his philosophy that

⁸⁸ Ibid., 230-242.

⁸⁹ Note that not all people benefit from society; the idea is that there are benefits to be had, not that everyone who enters a society and consents to the laws and rules of society will necessarily benefit – think of those who spend their entire lives in prison because they offended some law created by society that would not be punishable in the state of nature. Their consent to such punishment, however, is integral to the rule of law.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 216-230.

makes him an Enlightenment thinker and where we will find relative continuity between his work and other Enlightenment philosophers introduced in this chapter. Locke explains that parents have a certain power over their children because they have yet to develop the ability to *reason*. When a child is born, it is born with equal rights to freedom as any other person; however, children are subject to the rule of their parents because their parents have developed the ability to reason while the child has not. That is, reason is what leads one to freedom. Without reason, people cannot survive in the state of nature; reason is what allows us to function independently. Therefore, once one develops this power to reason, they are free. The difference between paternal power and political power is that the former disappears in time. Once the child develops the ability to reason, the power of the parent is dissolved in favor of the person who can now reason on their own. Political power, however, does not disappear; even when people are able to reason on their own, they are always subject to political power. The consent one gives to political power is permanent; it is consent to the powers that govern society in general so as to secure a form of power that applies to everyone equally. The consent to political power is the essence of the social contract and it is essentially *public*. Other reasons, be they cultural or religious, are tolerated insofar as they remain private.⁹¹

Lastly, let us look to Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*. According to Rousseau, any legitimate government must first and foremost protect the liberties of man (or people) instead of constrain them. In short, he concludes that legitimate political authority rests on a "social contract," which is agreed upon between members of a public political society.⁹²

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Rose Harrington (New York & London: Knickerbocker Press, 1893), 20.

Like Hobbes and Locke, he explains that man is born free in a “state of nature.”⁹³ Although there are minimal restraints in the state of nature, there are various drawbacks to retaining so many freedoms. There comes a point when people will benefit when their resources are pulled together, which progresses beyond mere survival or preservation. However, when people come together in larger groups or societies, some freedoms must be sacrificed for the preservation of the whole society. In such a society, however, every individual must be equally regarded; no individual or group of individuals can be placed above others in relation to the law. The law is applied equally to all individuals because individuals will naturally follow their own pursuits and act in accordance with their own interests.⁹⁴ The law is intended to preserve the security and benefits of the entire society in the face of the various interests and actions of individuals. In other words, the law is implemented to be sure that citizens obey their role and duty as citizens. Living in a society brings many benefits to individuals, which they enjoy as being willful members of a society; but in order to preserve the benefits of society there must be the assurance that all people consent to the law and the rules of the social contract. Put differently, civil society requires the sacrificing of various personal liberties in order to gain other liberties.

Agreeing with Locke, Rousseau explains that the only natural form of power that applies restraints on man in the state of nature is the power parents hold over their children; this, again, is because children lack reason and therefore parents must employ a power over their children in order to protect them. In other words, in a civil society, Rousseau argues that rulers have no natural rights over the ruled to justify their rule;⁹⁵ Rousseau’s social contract theory is an attempt

⁹³ Ibid., 2-7.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 23-25.

to locate the legitimacy of such political authority. We should also note that his social contract comes as a critique of other contemporary forms of monarchical and tyrannical rule.

Rousseau believes that there is a universal and natural sense of justice that comes from God.⁹⁶ However, he argues that there is nothing, outside of personal commitments, that makes people follow this sense of justice. Therefore, we must construct a system that binds people to these moral and civil standards to uphold the common good and society itself. The “sovereign,” Rousseau explains, is the active role the state plays, which is not bound to the social contract.⁹⁷ It is the absolute authority that laws are justified by; in the social contract, the sovereign is the collective will of the people. Therefore, the sovereign, which is the will of the people in order to preserve a people, will only act in the best interest of the people. In other words, the sovereign of the social contract is always dependent on a collective people (the majority); it is the power which all laws are derived from and answer to. The laws are intended to make people answerable to the sovereign. The sovereign is the will of the people and it explains how a people come together and form various norms and laws. The law is the way that the sovereign is maintained over time.⁹⁸

While the sovereign is the will of the majority (or the collective), it may be enforced by a select few who are elected to play such a role. Think, for instance, of the senators or judges who are elected to interpret and enforce the laws in order to protect and preserve society in general. However, we should not forget that the entire purpose of the social contract is to not only preserve the society as a whole; rather, the purpose is to preserve the society so that individuals can retain as many of their rights as possible as well. It is unavoidable that some freedoms will

⁹⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 19-28.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 23-25, 52-57.

be relinquished; however, the social contract does not aim for individual rights to be sacrificed for the society to survive at any cost. If people are not free to pursue their own interests in order for a civil society to survive, it is not a society worth saving. The sovereign, remember, is always an expression of the general will of the people; therefore, the sovereign will not require a complete relinquishing of individual rights and wills because it is itself the collective will of the people. Consenting to the social contract is to surrender one's individual rights to the sovereign and *not* to the government. The difference is that a government does not have to have the people's best interest in mind. Think of a tyrannical or monarchical government that only aims to preserve its own power and domination and thus deals with its citizens as a constant threat to that power and domination. The sovereign, which may be represented by a government, is what people are consenting to. If the elected officials (the government) are no longer working to uphold the sovereign, the government is corrupt and the people have the right to rebel or revolt.

Now, let us turn to the question of religion. Rousseau is frequently credited for being the first to conceive of "civil religion." He explains that in earlier societies the ruler of a state was considered a divine installation.⁹⁹ That is, the ruler of the state was thought to be chosen by the gods and thus a representative of the gods. Each state, which had its own religion, had its own laws of governance that was derived from its religion. Christianity, Rousseau argues, marked a unique shift away from this association. In Christianity there are two worlds wherein the kingdom of God becomes separate from the earthly world. In other words – and Rousseau does not use this language himself – we have an early articulation of the religious world becoming separate from a newly identifiable secular world. Therefore, each state could constitute its own

⁹⁹ Ibid., 202-221.

laws for this world while keeping them distinct from, but not altogether independent of, the kingdom of God.

This distinction, he explains, leads to the development of two kinds of religion – the “religion of man” and the “religion of the citizen.”¹⁰⁰ Religion of man is religion in the more traditional sense – or better, the religion that many conceive of today as being more traditional. This includes personal religious belief in a God or gods, ritual practices, and membership of a particular community. The “religion of man” is the moral foundation for an individual in his or her *personal, non-public* life. The religion of man is concerned with natural divine law and not the laws of the public state. It is most directly concerned with other-worldly pursuits or interests.

His discussion of “religion of the citizen,” when combined with the religion of man, is what he means by civil religion.¹⁰¹ Religion of the citizen combines the interests of the state and the interests of the church. It is important to note the assumed distinction that has already taken hold. There are two spheres: the religious, which is the private realm of the church and the individual; and the secular, which is the public realm of politics and government. Civil religion is, in a way, the shared space in a Venn diagram of two newly distinct spheres of the religious and the secular. In a civil political society that is answerable to the sovereign, both public civil religion (in that such respect for and worship of the law will exist) and private religious faith (religion of man) exist. In this situation, we get a vague sense of what civil religion looks like. He tells us that civil religion assumes that God exists, justice is centrally important, and the law is sanctified. Civil religion is, then, the (somewhat religiously influenced) moral foundation for a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 210.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

civil political society. There is general agreement on various moral tenets and the general will of the people is upheld by an analogous reverence and respect for the sovereign.

This religious-secular distinction is a necessary dichotomy of the secularization theories I engage in the following chapters. In the next section of this chapter, I will analyze the ways in which Enlightenment philosophers contributed heavily to a broader and essentially critical narrative on religion in the modern world – namely, that religion is a remnant of the pre-Enlightenment era, as it belongs rightly in the past. This is the earliest version of the secularization thesis, which is offered – in various forms – by Feuerbach, Hume, Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Freud, and Marx. I cannot afford to give a full explanation of each of these prominent contributors, so allow me to give a brief overview of some of their theories in order to paint the larger picture of implicit secularization theories that took place from the 17th to early-20th centuries.

Planting the Seeds of Secularization

While there is no shortage of Enlightenment philosophers critiquing religion and predicting its inevitable demise,¹⁰² Scottish philosopher David Hume is perhaps the most influential and most pertinent to this discussion. He was influenced by the works of Hobbes and Locke and became an outspoken critic of religion. Hume is not convinced that religion is a universal human phenomenon; that is, he does not believe that there is something called religion that exists in all places (or communities) and in all times. This very point is still hotly debated

¹⁰² Such criticisms and predictions were not the result of philosophy alone, of course. In addition to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, the works of Voltaire, Newton, and Feuerbach contributed to the narrative that religion was a remnant of a pre-Enlightenment past and it was thus doomed to impending decline.

between social theorists, on the one hand, and philosopher and critical theorists, on the other. Hume argues that there are noticeable differences between religious expressions and that there are many places with no religion at all. It is because of this that he believes that religious ideas are *secondary* – they are expressions or manifestations of more fundamental human experience. Modern religious ideas, according to Hume, are the product of contemplating nature with the faculties of reason.

Hume argues that there was a basic progression of religious ideas, starting with the polytheism of the people of pre-civilization and ending eventually with a non-religious scientific (and more correct) interpretation of the world. He claims that ancient polytheists did not have the time nor the ability to question nature or to seek its origins. Therefore, the origins of religion are found in the contemplation of human life. Polytheism and idolatry, which are the earliest forms of religion according to Hume, arose from people's experiences in the world.¹⁰³ By experiences, he means everything from the pain and suffering humans endure to the joy and pleasures they experience. These experiences, though, are not *reasoned* reflections on the principles of nature.¹⁰⁴ He also notes that the evolution of religion is not a fluid transition; rather, people tend to oscillate between polytheism and monotheism over time. That is, people do not simply listen to reason when it is presented to them. They are also continually influenced by their personal experiences, feelings, and emotions, which lend well to polytheistic conclusions. Over time, however, Hume argues that reason becomes undeniable.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (London: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1880), 27-32.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 44-46.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 27-33. Hume believes that later religious developments, ideas, and principles are based in such reason and it is because of this that he believes that polytheism must have predated monotheism or the belief in one Supreme Being. He argues that reason could not lead someone

Hume argues that reason-centered contemplation of nature is what leads to the development of religious ideas. He argues that monotheism is the more developed form of religious belief because humans' understanding of nature develops in line with their faculties of reason; therefore, monotheism makes more sense than polytheism (but not as much sense as the inevitable atheistic worldview). In other words, one god that created the entire universe *and* the laws of the universe can be reasoned better than the belief in various gods with their respective powers. When people begin to better understand the universe, they understand that there are natural laws that are universal (or highly consistent); to assert that one god created those laws is more reasonably defensible, according to Hume, than the argument that multiple gods are competing with each other for power and influence.

Many theists, Hume explains, accept the laws of nature and actually use them as support for their belief in God. What he means by this is that when some theists begin to learn about the laws of nature they tend to fall back into a "deistic" perspective: God created the heavens and the earth, along with the laws of nature, and does not intervene regularly. The point is that the laws of nature are understood to be created by God. However, when people learned that the laws of nature function *independently* of God, that the laws will function with incredible regularity even when God or the Supreme Being is taken out of the equation, their faith begins to crumble. However, again, Hume argues that once they are taught (with more philosophy) that the laws of nature are the *design* of that God or Supreme Being, it quickly becomes the strongest proof for God's existence.¹⁰⁶ While polytheistic societies could not rely on this reasoning (because each god has its own power and influence and therefore not all events can be reconciled to a single

to go from believing in one god to multiple gods; therefore, he looks at the origins of polytheism as a way to better understand the origins of religion.

¹⁰⁶ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Penguin Classics,

design), the concept of a single God can take credit for creating such uniformity and universality. Philosophy, Hume tells us, arose, in a sense, to point out the weak foundations of theology. That is, while the two have been intertwined for centuries, theism and theology have been the foundation for religion while philosophy and reason are often interjected in order to confront the legitimacy of such arguments, explanations, and superstitions. Hume argues, though, that as philosophy matures, it will slowly move away from theology because it will continue to point to the absurdities and contradictions within it.¹⁰⁷ Philosophy, in other words, is a threat to theology and religion.

Hume's naturalist and skeptical approach to religion assumes a certain type of religious belief, which is a seemingly common post-Enlightenment form of religious belief in the West. His normative statements on religion fail to pay respect to the variety of religious beliefs that exist throughout his and our worlds. Also, Hume employs a narrow and relatively underwhelming conception of "belief" throughout his works. Everyone believes, according to Hume, in the form of propositions based on scientific proofs of probability. I would like to suggest that there are other forms of belief – beliefs that most of us engage in consistently – that are not concerned with facts, evidence, or scientific probability. These beliefs affect the way we live our lives, understand the world around us, and are just as valuable and meaningful as our drier, philosophical convictions.

On this criticism, allow me to discuss the first few paragraphs of his essay, *The Natural History of Religion*. Hume writes, "The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events; and what ideas will naturally be entertained of invisible, unknown

1990).

¹⁰⁷ Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 44-66.

powers, while men lie under dismal apprehensions of any kind, may easily be conceived.”¹⁰⁸

Here, Hume provides an essential root for all religion: the fear of the future and the unknown.

Additionally, he provides a description of religious belief: it is a deluded form of supernatural belief that can be disproved. He then forwards an early-Feuerbachian account for the “other-

worldly” when he writes, “Our natural terrors present the notion of a devilish and malicious deity: Our propensity to adulation leads us to acknowledge an excellent and divine.”¹⁰⁹ What,

then, do we make of the many non-Western religious communities and individuals who do not fit these models (e.g. pre-colonial religions of northwest India, Zen Buddhism, as well as many

Native American religious groups). Religion need not be understood in the way Hume describes if only for the fact that it is not understood as such by many groups that are otherwise considered religious. Furthermore, the effects of such normative descriptions of religion has affected the

“discovery” of other non-Western “religious” groups.¹¹⁰ That is to say, this dominant conception

of what religious belief entails has been ascribed to others in a way that fails to appreciate real differences and promotes violent forms of Western imperialism. This is why it is important to

study the genealogy of the category of religion, for after one understands how the category was created it becomes much more difficult to speak in such generalities. Generalizing the category

of religion is more often a re-inscription of dominant western tropes.¹¹¹ Herein lies the seeds of secularization planted in the 18th century. It is also during this time that many of the social

sciences, which inform religious studies, philosophy, and sociology, begin to surface.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 26

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 27

¹¹⁰ Chidester, *Savage Systems*, 219.

¹¹¹ This will be the topic of the following chapter, so I will withhold detailed explanations here.

The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Scientific Study of Religion

In this section, I argue that the emergence of the social sciences in the 19th century continues to contribute to the Enlightenment narrative of religion that has been the focus of this chapter. That is, a narrative which is both responsible for constructing a particular category of religion and then critiquing the content of that very category (i.e. religion) and predicting its ultimate demise. I am arguing that many of these particularly European assumptions about what constitutes the religious become deeply woven into the fabric of social sciences and are thus are incapable of reconciling the various manifestations of their assumed subject. In short, the theorists I summarize in the following pages tend to focus on the criteria of belief in a higher power (usually interchangeable with “God”) and the ways in which such beliefs respond to (or fail to respond to) scientific and philosophical inquiry. Second, such theorists – depending on the discipline – also focus on the criteria of cultural belonging, or membership in an organized community. In other words, the social sciences began with the assumption that religion is false, a remnant of the past, and to be eventually replaced by a scientific (natural) understanding of the world. Moreover, in the 19th century we witness a notable shift in the way in which religion is studied; religion is presented as a subject worthy of objective (social) scientific study.

The 19th century social scientific attitude that I highlight in this section is perhaps best summarized when Ludwig Feuerbach argues, “that the secret of theology is anthropology; that the absolute mind is the so-called finite subjective mind.”¹¹² In other words, religion is a human invention and is thus best understood through the social sciences. Religion, according to Feuerbach, is *secondary*. Religious ideas are projections of the fears, desires, and ideal types that

¹¹² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity: A Philosophy and Critique of Religion*, trans. Marian Evans, 2nd ed. (London: Trubner and Co., Ludgate Hill, 1881), 270.

resonate in the human mind. Religion can tell us a lot about the state of the human mind and cultural ideals, yet it can say very little, if anything, about the reality of the universe. It is this presumption that religion is false that later social theorists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke take exception to. We will see that they argue that this presumption is rarely, if ever, confronted in the social sciences. For now, I would like to focus on a similar vein of discourse, not to in the end come to the same conclusion as Stark and Finke, but rather to lay the groundwork for an intellectual context of 20th century secularization debates.

The social scientific study of religion begins, one might argue, with the work of F. Max Müller. Müller is a 19th century philologist and professor at Oxford University. His research focused on ancient Sanskrit and the historical relationships between various world languages. He developed a controversial theory that religion – and the various world’s religions - could best be understood through a comparative analysis and distinct categorization of their respective languages.¹¹³ His goal in studying religion was to be as objective, scientific, and non-theological as possible. In other words, Muller set out to create a new academic discipline:

Religionswissenschaft, or the “scientific study of religion.” He argued that religion had always been studied from within the discipline of theology, which is too often restricted to a single religious (or denominational) perspective and is thus not sufficiently objective or scientific. Through an elaborate system of philological and taxonomical categorization, which ties language to race and religion, Müller concludes that some religions are more mature than others.¹¹⁴ Müller presents a theoretical framework for the evolution of religion, which he claims is more “scientific.” This gives rise to multiple theories of religion that also assume a particular

¹¹³ F. Max Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 66-68.

¹¹⁴ I engage the details of his theory in the following chapter, when I introduce the work of historian Tomoko Masuzawa.

evolutionary trajectory. The following theories agree, for the most part, that there is a singular genus, or phenomenon, called religion that has evolved over millennia into a variety of species. What is most important to note is the continuous assumption that modern religions share a common origin in a distant past. Though we will see slight variations, the predominant 19th century model of religious evolution begins with an ahistorical imagining of “primitivism/animism/magic”¹¹⁵ that, due to a greater reliance on *reason* over time, evolves into polytheism, then monotheism, and eventually into a presumably atheistic scientific naturalism. This, I am arguing, is a model of secularization that informed a variety of social scientific disciplines, including ethnography, anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

E.B. Tylor, who is a contemporary of Müller, is one of the founders of modern anthropology as well as a leading theorist of religion in the 19th century. His most well-known book, *Primitive Culture*, introduces his theory of animism and outlines a theoretical framework of social evolution that ends with the inevitable demise of religion. *Primitive Culture* is published in 1871, twelve years after Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, and the same year as Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*. In other words, Tylor is writing a time when the naturalist perspective begins to take hold; a number of the natural sciences – including the biological and astronomical sciences – increasingly challenge many of the presuppositions of traditional Christianity, which had enjoyed a long history of largely unquestioned authority.¹¹⁶ Tylor begins

¹¹⁵ I say “ahistorical” because all of the theorists in this section project their theories into the past without any historical proof of such existence. That is, many, such as E.B Tylor, James Frazer, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx assume that there is great continuity between a number of contemporary indigenous, non-industrialized, isolated societies and the way humans lived thousands of years ago.

¹¹⁶ Some aspects that were openly challenged were things like the possibility of miracles, the origin of the human species, the origin of the universe, the divinity of Christ, as well as the authority of scripture.

his investigations with the presumption that religion is a universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon. That is, his theory of religion, like that of Müller's, assumes that there is something called religion that exists, at various stages of its evolution, in more or less the same way in almost all cultures.

E.B. Tylor was born into a wealthy family in London, England in 1832. Although he never attained a university education, he contributed heavily to the birth of anthropology with a number of ethnographic studies. At age 23 he moved to Mexico and Central America, as he was advised that warmer climates would help with his tuberculosis. It is here that he began to witness and subsequently study the religion of what he calls, "primitive cultures." Unlike some of his predecessors, Tylor did not believe that a culture or religion could be reduced to a theology or language. Tylor, like Müller, seeks to understand religion from a scientific perspective, but he is intent on studying more than language. Instead, he studies the habits, customs, rituals, and ideas of local, native cultures. He theorizes that the entire human race exhibits "primal unity."¹¹⁷ In other words, all humans think the same way; they have the same ability to reason and the same logical faculties. While we take this for granted today, it goes against the prevailing belief at the time that different races of people (which overlap with religious classifications) have distinctly different natures. The difference, for example, between the "African nature" and the "Christian-European nature" is a result of a difference in the ways in which such groups are hard-wired, so to speak. Tylor is actually a progressive (for his time) when he argues that any differences we see in cultures or religious groups are *not* the result of biology, but rather of experience and rational inquiry.

¹¹⁷ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, vol. 2 (London: Bradbury, Evans and Co., 1871), 223.

Tylor claims that humans' ability to understand the world around them improves over time.¹¹⁸ However, not all cultures advance at the same rate; some, like the many European cultures, have accelerated while others, like the many indigenous cultures who are the focus of his ethnographic work, have progressed at a much slower rate. Therefore, Tylor argues that we can learn a great deal about the supposed primitive history of modern cultures (i.e. primarily European) as we better understand the religious systems of contemporary "primitive cultures."¹¹⁹ It is important to note that his theory assumes that there is something called "religion" that, if studied carefully, can be found in all cultures. Furthermore, the nature of the religion of a culture is tied to how well that culture understands the (scientific) nature of the universe. For example, Tylor believes that the earliest human societies overwhelmingly believed in magic, which he defines as an erroneous belief in the loose association or relationship between otherwise unrelated phenomena.¹²⁰ As humans continue to observe the natural world around them, the supposed causal relationship is proven false. Many of the myths that have been preserved for thousands of years are remnants of this misguided, bygone era. They are, according to Tylor, real attempts to explain the natural world. Once magic is proven false, which is relatively early in a culture's evolution, we see the rise of *animism*.¹²¹

Animism, or the "belief in spiritual things," is the foundation and origin of religion, according to Tylor. This is the belief that spirits, which are personal powers that exist within nature, animate our world. This is a better, albeit incorrect, explanation than magic because it can reconcile logical inconsistencies. For example, if the magician believes that one act should cause

¹¹⁸ Ibid., II: 224-275.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., II: 276-327.

¹²⁰ Ibid., II: 101-102.

¹²¹ Ibid., II: 168.

a specific response (e.g. the beating of a drum leads to rain), she is unable to provide a reason when the effect does not follow the supposed cause. She might question the performance of the cause (e.g. “perhaps I did not beat the drum *correctly*”), but over time the magician – through a rational observation of nature – will realize that there is in fact no causal relationship. The animist, however, who believes that the relationship is not one of “principles,” but rather “personalities,” does not feel defeat so quickly.¹²² I should note here that I am also drawing upon the work of anthropologist James G. Frazer, who further engages Tylor’s theory of animism in his own anthropological work, *The Golden Bough*.¹²³ If the animist believes that the effect of rain is controlled by spirits with personalities (“supreme spirits,” e.g.), then the drumming, or cause, is understood differently. Even if the act of drumming is performed correctly, one cannot be sure that it will lead to rain because it is subject to the decision of the spirits.

As society continues to better understand the natural world, the beliefs of the culture evolve as well. Animism becomes polytheism; polytheism evolves into monotheism, and eventually monotheism will be replaced by a modern, scientific age.¹²⁴ Tylor is essentially arguing that animism belongs to the childhood of the human race and, as we are now entering adulthood, we must put such childish things away.¹²⁵ Frazer, who again dedicates much of his life expanding upon Tylor’s theory, claims that there is another sharp contrast to be made

¹²² Ibid., II: 229, 276, 305.

¹²³ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 62.

¹²⁴ For our purposes, the details of this theory are less important than the presumed trajectory of the evolution, which begins with the irrational belief in magic and superstition and ends with the rational (and inevitable) conclusion of scientific atheism.

¹²⁵ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 19.

between the “primitive” and “modern” cultures; that is, the former are more brutal and savage while the latter is civilized.¹²⁶

This attitude, which not only predicts the inevitable demise of religion in the face of reason, but also functions to crystalize a particular European Protestant definition of religion and imparts a moral hierarchy between the savage and the civilized is replicated in a number of other social sciences that study religion. The problem with this, again, is that the category of religion represented in 19th century social scientific studies does not adequately represent the content of the traditions (or species) that are generally included in the category (or genus) of religion. In later chapters, I will argue that this framework is adopted into 20th century sociological studies of religion. In other words, modern secularization theories employ a restrictive and non-representative category of religion that functions to further delegitimize non-orthodoxic and non-Western forms of religion.

It is at this point that I would like to move from the foundational works of early anthropologists and ethnographers to the contributions of the later 19th century social scientists who also attempt to uncover the source or origin of religion. I will start with major contributors from the disciplines of psychology and sociology before returning to 20th century anthropology. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud seeks to uncover the source of religion. Here, Freud is responding to a claim that the true source of religion is an “oceanic feeling” that people experience and that the source of religion is not mere “illusion” (which he claimed in an earlier work, *Future of an Illusion*).¹²⁷ Freud, who says that he has never experienced this oceanic

¹²⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 11, 24-25, 27-28, 32, 35, 42. (This distinction is reiterated hundreds of times in *The Golden Bough*.)

¹²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 11, 21-22.

feeling, points out that if this is indeed the true source of religion, it is difficult, if not impossible to *prove*. It is difficult to examine and interpret such feelings “scientifically.”¹²⁸ More likely, Freud argues, this feeling is a reversion to a state of consciousness where the ego does not recognize itself as separate from the world of objects around it. In other words, it is a state of consciousness that is (most likely) explained through psychology. In his previous book, *Future of an Illusion*, he was less concerned with the sources of religion and more concerned with the consequences of beliefs and doctrines of traditional religion. He explains that life is difficult for most people; we suffer, so we create coping mechanisms to deal with such suffering.¹²⁹

Freud explains that people desire, above all else, to be happy. Working against this desire to be happy are various sources of suffering: our bodies physically fail us, causing pain; the world inflicts damage upon us (think of natural disasters, weather, etc.); and the relationships we create with other people bring much pain and suffering. That is, when we come together to live in civilizations, we often bring great suffering upon ourselves. This is where religion comes into the picture. Freud argues that people isolate themselves to escape the discontents of civilization, but in the end this does not work because societies are structured in a way that necessitate collective participation. So, we instead search for other ways to alleviate the suffering. Religion is one such attempt, according to Freud, insofar as it constructs a new reality based on a wish or a delusion that cannot be fulfilled in this world. Religion reduces all other desires and wishes to relocate ultimate happiness and release from suffering to religion itself. In Freud’s terminology, religion spares people their individual neurosis and reduces the possibility of happiness to the full submission to the path of religion.¹³⁰ He tells us to think of a child who looks to his father

¹²⁸ Ibid., 11-14.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

with both fear and dependence. As we grow into rational adults, we continue to fear the unknown and the inevitability of death, so we create gods in order to replace the father figure that has degraded.¹³¹ In other words, we know we are going to die and religion serves the practical function of replacing that fear with hope for continued survival. Freud explains that humans often accept conclusions as true for non-logical reasons; in other words, we often believe in conclusions because we *want* them to be true and not necessarily because they are logically convincing.

Again, Freud claims that some sources of suffering are impossible to avoid or extinguish. Coming together in a civilization, however, leads to many benefits, such as security and protection (think of Locke and Rousseau's social contract theories).¹³² In securing these benefits though, certain sacrifices are demanded. Freud points out that we do not, by our very nature, seek to help the other. Rather, we are always in constant competition and look to use our neighbors for our personal benefit. Our natural state is one of *aggression*, according to Freud.¹³³ Thus, when living in a society, one of the things we sacrifice is this natural aggressive tendency; we cannot take for ourselves or act aggressively in every instance of conflict; rather, we must live in a way that suppresses these tendencies in order to secure the benefits of civilization. However, the "benefits" that he speaks of (such as security against the state of nature) are far outweighed by the sacrifice we make to be part of this community: our happiness. In other words, Freud claims that in becoming more secure, we have sacrificed our natural state of being human. When living in a society, our natural aggressions must be suppressed. Freud argues that this suppression of aggression, necessitated by the parameters of living in a civilization, are turned

¹³¹ Ibid., 19.

¹³² Ibid., 61-63.

¹³³ Ibid., 58-60.

onto ourselves. When we turn our aggression onto ourselves, we cause a sense of guilt, which extinguishes our happiness.

Religion seeks to transform this aspect of civilization that turns the guilt onto oneself and extinguishes our happiness. Religion redirects this guilt and seeks to preserve happiness by substituting guilt with the concept of sin. By submitting to religion (and it seems like he basically has Christianity in mind here), one can be redeemed of her sin in a hypothetical afterlife. This redirects one's focus away from real suffering to the promise of eternal happiness. The first and most obvious problem for Freud is that religious ideas are simply false. That is, even though they purport to be factual, they are false description of nature and thus their conclusion have no warrant. "Religious ideas," he writes, "are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's belief."¹³⁴ The problem, for Freud, is that the religious "solution" to the problem of guilt and happiness in civilization is no solution at all. The guilt does not disappear; it does not address the more fundamental source of the problem: civilization itself. Rather, it promises that submission to the religious life will, in the distant (and to Freud, *non-existent*) end, lead to happiness.

It is important to note some of the major themes in Freud's analysis of religion. First, as we have already seen, religion is assumed to be a distinct sphere of its own, distinguishable from the public, civil society. Second, religion is a remnant of an irrational past that continues to serve a functional purpose in modern society. Eventually, however, religious ideas will be replaced by a scientific age:

The scientific spirit brings about a particular attitude towards worldly matters; before religious matters it pauses for a little, hesitates, and finally there too crosses the threshold.

¹³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Martino Fine Books, 2010), 31.

In this process there is no stopping; the greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling-away from religious belief at first only from its obsolete and objectionable trappings, but later from its fundamental postulates as well.¹³⁵

It is clear that Freud not only harbors an unfavorable view of religion, but he is also forwarding a secularization thesis of his own. As societies become more modern and scientific, religious beliefs will become less convincing and thus will begin to disappear.

The last theorist I engage in this section on the 19th century academic study of religion is Karl Marx. Marx was, first and foremost, concerned with understanding how people relate to each other in their competitive struggles to survive. He argues that the most important tool of the modern world is capital; capital organizes the social interactions of people. Therefore, one's social location is dependent upon the division of labor. Together, the division of labor and capital function to organize all of the other tools of society. In order to challenge this power, which is the social organization of the division of labor, we need to look from the perspective of those who are suffering as a result of it.

Marx is a materialist, which is to say he looks to the material conditions (i.e. capital and labor) of the world as being the most influential, foundational, and primary aspect of society. Our ideas – be they religious, philosophical, moral, artistic, etc. – are secondary. They are the product of the material conditions in which people find themselves. Ideas are reflections of a world that is primarily material in nature. Thus, Marx draws two basic conclusions: 1) economic realities determine human behavior and 2) human history is a history of class struggle between those who

¹³⁵ Ibid., 38.

own things (“the oppressor” or “the bourgeoisie”) and those who must work to survive (“the oppressed” or “the proletariat”).¹³⁶

In the capitalist structure of modern society, human labor has been commodified in such a way that it is viewed and experienced as “work,” and not an expression of what it means to be human.¹³⁷ Marx claims that labor ought to be rich, creative, varied, and satisfying. It is an expression of the whole personality. In the transition to capitalism, however, we turned to see our “animal functions” – eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. - as “free time” or as what makes us “human.” That is, the more we get to do these things, the more human we feel. Marx points out that these are actually more animal, not more human experiences. This is the result of the capitalist system, which has completely inverted our sense of self. This is what he calls “alienation.”¹³⁸ Not only are we transforming the world in our acts of labor, but we are alienating ourselves from our human sensibilities. However, we are not aware of this alienation; we go to work to make a living; we compete for wages; we feel at home when we are not at work. This is because workers do not control the means of production.

Marx’s communist theory hinges on the notion that workers must control the means of production. Because the means of production has such a profound effect on how society is structured, workers must have control over it. Marx points out that in the modern era social relations have been reduced to the workers and the capitalists, which entails a great amount of conflict and struggle between the two groups. This class struggle, he claims, cannot sustain itself. There is simply (and obviously) too much suffering that results from this discordance. The only

¹³⁶ Karl Marx, *Marx On Religion*, ed. John Raines (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 170-181.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154-162.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

way to end such suffering is a revolution. The essence of religion, according to Marx, is the expression and active protest of this suffering. It is an expression of human alienation.¹³⁹

What, then, does he mean, when he famously says, “Religion is the opium of the people”? First, let us look at the longer excerpt from his well-known essay, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” where we find this often quoted passage,

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real [economic] distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the *demand to give up a condition which needs illusion*.¹⁴⁰

Religion, in other words, is the expression of real human suffering and it is *protest* against this suffering. The world in which we have created for ourselves brings us terrible pain and suffering; we compete with each other to survive, we exploit each other; nature brings us suffering in the form of illness, pain, etc. Religion is a reaction to all of this; religion is an expression, saying that this world is intolerable. We suffer more than we can bear sometimes.

Why is Marx, like so many of his predecessors, critical of religion? First, Marx believes that religion promotes a number of false beliefs. He agrees with Feuerbach when he writes, “They take what is properly human and assign it to some alien being called the absolute or God. [...] Man, who looked for a superman in the fantastic reality of heaven [...] found nothing there but a *reflection* of himself.”¹⁴¹ He also rejects religion because it provides *illusory* happiness, when people ought to be striving for *real* (material) happiness. The state of happiness that religion provides is thin, unfulfilling, and ultimately unsustainable. Like opioids, it has the power

¹³⁹ Ibid., 170-172, 154-162.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 171.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 170.

to dull the pain but it does nothing to treat the source of suffering. He may think differently if he encountered the power of the liberation theology or the religious protests of abolitionists in America. However, we should note that Marx is essentially responding to the state-sponsored religion of Lutheranism in Germany with which he was most familiar. And herein lies an important theme of this dissertation; Marx uses religion to mean something very generic while the contents of the category are rather particular. I am arguing that religion was ubiquitously assumed to be a universal, transcultural, and transhistorical phenomenon by prominent 19th century social scientific academics when the content of their respective theories were overwhelmingly particular (i.e. *not* transhistorical, transcultural, or universal). The problem is that 20th and 21st century studies on, and subsequent theories of, secularization have effectively preserved many of the assumptions we find in 19th century social scientific studies of religion. This is made more evident in the definitional criteria of religion employed by Pew Research Center's forum on Religion and Public Life, which secularization theorists rely upon in their analyses.

Returning to Marx, he argues that the more one gives to God the less she can give to the people in this world. We know, again, that in many religious cultures, these two are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps it would be better to say that Marx rejected a certain form of religion, but let us proceed with the term in general just to get a better sense of what Marx was rejecting in his time. He believes that religious theologies are in conflict with science and with other religious theologies. This is one reason he calls for a separation of church and state; he does not believe that one religion can rule a state while being fair to other religions. The relationship of a person to the state ought to be public and political, not private and religious. Again, Marx is assuming a

clear and consistent distinction between the religious and the secular, or the private sphere of religion and the public sphere of politics.

In this section, I hoped to highlight some ways in which the birth of the social sciences in the 19th century encoded particular criteria for what constitutes religion (as well as a particularly negative attitude toward religion). In other words, the category of religion is primarily informed by a number of post-Enlightenment Protestant assumptions. These include, but are not limited to the following: Religion is an essentially *private* affair that can be analytically distinguished from other public spheres, such as politics, law, and medicine. Religion is primarily a matter of *belief*; furthermore, many of the beliefs that are (assumed to be) foundational to religion are, with modern advancements in science, becoming increasingly falsifiable. Lastly, because of this, religion will either decline or become increasingly displaced as we progress into a modern age of reason and scientific understanding. This, we will see, is the basis not only for the majority of 20th century social scientific research on religion, but it is also the same framework adopted by 21st secularization theorists and social surveyors of religion (e.g. Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life).

Staying the Course: The Continuation of a Dominant Discourse on Religion

I will finish this chapter by tracing two dominant threads of discourse that develop in response to many of the aforementioned 19th century social theories on religion. In short, I argue that much of what was just presented goes largely unchallenged in 20th and 21st century secularization theories. While there are countless traceable paths that lead us from the former to the latter, I have chosen to focus on two. First, I will introduce the work of Clifford Geertz, who is widely held as the one of the most – if not *the* most – influential cultural anthropologist

studying religion in the 20th century. I begin with a brief overview of his most significant contributions to the social scientific study of religion and then look to the ways in which he continues to shape and reinforce the dichotomous construction of the religious and the secular. In the following chapter, with the help of Talal Asad, I will discuss the ways in which Geertz's theory and definition of religion remain within the confines and logic of many of his predecessors whom we have already met. I eventually conclude in agreement with Asad, whose post-colonial and post-structuralist criticisms will be further explored in the next chapter. In short, while Geertz does well to both expand and particularize the study of religion, pushing the boundaries of his predecessors, Asad uncovers the material and historical conditions that led to the construction of the categories of the religious and the secular.

Clifford Geertz is an American anthropologist who argues that anthropological work on religion has made very few advances in understanding the broad and diverse category of religion because it has largely relied upon a narrow intellectual tradition. In other words, the anthropology that preceded him too often assumed a substantive definition of religion, which is primarily informed by the criterion of belief.¹⁴² Instead, Geertz explains that, in order to grasp the nature of religion, the anthropologist must consider an array of additional criteria; after all, religions are not simply collections of beliefs which can be compared to other sets of beliefs. They are *cultural systems*, which are imbedded with a variety of symbols that have meaning to those who relate to them. These symbols become the focus of his approach to understanding and defining religion. He defines religion in terms of the attitudes it seeks to instill in human beings vis-à-vis a transcendent world of meaning, thus adding a functionalist element to the long-

¹⁴²Talal Asad also tackles this question, which will be explored in the following chapter.

assumed substantive anthropological definitions that precede him.¹⁴³ As a reminder, I am using Geertz to locate the progressive advancement of 20th century anthropological theoretical work on religion while also concluding that his general theory (though better in many ways) remains bound within the logic of his predecessors. In other words, sociological surveyors and secularization theorists remain tied to aspects of Geertz's theory of religion that are continuous with the preceding assumption that religion is an aspect of both the self and of society that can be consistently distinguished and disentangled from other secular spheres across cultures.¹⁴⁴

In his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz argues that religious systems function to preserve the sacred in the face of the profane, secular world that surrounds them.¹⁴⁵ For Geertz, this attitude hinges on developing moods and motivations that lead people to particular actions and a better understanding of the world in which we live. His anthropological theory of religion seeks to better understand modern manifestations of religion by locating continuity between current manifestations and a theory of religious origins; in other words, Geertz's theory of religion claims that the sacred has been *preserved* through history. As such, social theorists assume that "it" can be located and measured over time and across cultures.

For Geertz, cultural patterns, which often include religious symbols, are treated as a type of DNA for both the particular culture and the general phenomenon of religion.¹⁴⁶ These symbols lead men and women to specific "moods and motivations" that, in turn, lead to a set of actions, or an ethos. Therefore, to understand the ethos of a community, one can look to symbols as carriers of meaning that lead to particular motivations. Religious symbols differ from other, more

¹⁴³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90-121.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 98, 112.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 98, 112, 124-125.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 92-93.

secular symbols, in that they are carriers of *sacred* meaning related to a general order of transcendence.¹⁴⁷ In other words, while the world is experienced in all of its chaos, religious symbols are ways of instilling a sense of order to such chaos; this order is transcendent to humans and this world because it posits a reality that is beyond the experiences within this world.¹⁴⁸ This is not only what makes it religious, but also what makes it continuous with religious systems throughout history and across cultures.

Geertz is arguing that a system of sacred symbols that seeks to transcend this world is not only the origin of religious systems, but also the continued expression of them. He is not saying that the symbols and expressions of each religious system are identical; he accounts for such differences and warns against the tendency to be reductionist. However, he does argue that religion – as he has defined it – can serve (eventually, or theoretically) a function of generality.¹⁴⁹ This is why he explains that the point is not to compare specific practices, expressions, or rituals (as many of his predecessors have); rather, his approach is to identify a general framework for which religion fits into. For Geertz, it is a matter of understanding how people in general continue to create systems of meaning surrounding the sacred (which itself differs in its various particular manifestations). Therefore, his critique of anthropology is that anthropologists often seek to explain religion's relationship with society without first seeking to understand the phenomenon of religion. His efforts to describe this phenomenon is his theory of religion. Religion is essentially a cultural system of sacred symbols of transcendence that leads people to act in specific ways relating to how they understand the universe. This theory of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 126-131.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 99-103.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 124-125.

religion is intended to account for the ancient or primitive forms of religion often studied by anthropologists and ethnographers as well as modern religious traditions.

To give a glimpse of what is in the chapters to come, modern secularizations theorists continue to favor Geertz's influential definition because it "stays the course." In other words, Geertz's contributions to the study of religion have perpetuated the 19th century assumption that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon, thus leading to the 20th century sociological assumption that "it" can be measured over time and across cultures in a consistent and representative manner. I am arguing that religion – as practiced and expressed throughout the world – cannot be adequately captured by a definition of religion. As I said in the opening chapter, religion may exist throughout the world, but efforts to locate and measure it become inherently problematic and are largely non-representative.

CHAPTER 3:

THE GENEALOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF “THE RELIGIOUS” AND “THE SECULAR”

Constructing the Category of Religion: A Western Project

Tomoko Masuzawa, Professor of History and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan opens her book, *The Invention of World Religions*, with an explanation that Europeans had an established way of categorizing people of the world; there are Christians, Jews, Muslims, and “the rest.”¹⁵⁰ She describes this as the “logic of European hegemony” – the idea that Christianity is the one true universal religion while an undefined and notably inferior number of other religions are present in the world. This exclusive list eventually expands to more than ten groups, which are often referred to as “world religions.” While it may appear that the trend is to be increasingly inclusive – more groups are being recognized alongside the major three Abrahamic traditions as legitimate religions – Masuzawa explains that the same logic that placed European Protestantism on top of the world religious hierarchical structure remains present in contemporary discourses on pluralism.

What I hope to bring to the foreground is a certain logic, or certain ideological persuasions that are covered over by and at the same time still operative in our present-day discourse, that is, in the now familiar, routinized strategy for mapping the world religiously. It will be suggested, in effect, that the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions, when it finally broke out into the open and became an established practice in the first half of the twentieth century, neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony – formerly couched in the language of the universality of Christianity – but, in a way, gave it a new lease.¹⁵¹

She is arguing that the language of pluralism, which is seemingly universal and inclusive, actually gives the old hierarchical structure a new lease on its power and persuasion. Within

¹⁵⁰ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, xi, 228-230.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

pluralism there is a hidden exclusivism. The hierarchy she unveils remains present within contemporary discourses on pluralism in as far as only certain forms of religious expression are incorporated into the pluralist agenda, namely those that have been sufficiently translated to the Protestant standards that have informed the category of religion in the first place. In other words, the power of these hidden exclusions lie in the supposed universal nature of the category of religion.

When new religions and peoples around the world were being discovered, the old four-category classificatory system slowly became dismantled. The fourth category of “the rest” simply accounted for too many groups. In order to account for the differences found within this group, new religious categories were created. “Religion” is understood to be the “genus” of which there are many classificatory “species,” or “religions.” If all religions are assumed to be related in some fashion, their relationships and evolution can be comparatively analyzed. This leads to a new, more scientific classificatory system: the “science of religion.” The idea was that people, like every other object in the world, could be objectively classified and categorized. “This should be counted as a gain for the fledging science of religion.”¹⁵² The “science of religion” demands religion to be understood as a genus “and ‘religions’ as particular species that are objectively discernable, identifiable, and at least in principle, isolable.”¹⁵³

Though there were many who contributed to the founding of the science of religion, much of it again goes back to the philological work of Max Müller.¹⁵⁴ Müller believed language to be a universal phenomenon that matured over time. There was a stark distinction made between Aryan and Semitic languages, the former which was assumed to be the more mature,

¹⁵² Ibid., 64.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 64-65.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 107-109.

civilized, and intellectual form of language, the latter being less mature, limited, uncivilized. This maps on to European hierarchical view of the people of the world – Europeans and Indians are the descendants and contemporary manifestations of the Aryan language while Muslims and Jews are Semitic. The power of making such philological distinctions, which Europeans at the time took to be a serious scientific approach to *describe* the world, is that these divisions and distinctions are taken to be *natural*. That is, Christian Europeans are believed to be naturally more mature and thus intellectually and morally superior. Other, non-Aryan descendants are thus considered morally and intellectually inferior. Therefore, the genealogy of language gives birth to a genealogy of race, religion, and ethnicity. Because religions were thought to be inextricably entwined with language, Christianity retains its supremacy while Islam becomes relegated to the barbarity of the uncivilized. Again, the power of this is that such conclusions were considered neutral, objective, and thus scientific. It is no longer only the Christian theologian who claims moral, intellectual, and theological superiority. The “scientist” is now confirming what the theologian has claimed for centuries.

Comparative theology was primarily a Protestant endeavor where theologians worked with the assumption that Christianity was unique and superior to other religions. Masuzawa writes,

The project of comparative theology has been deemed not scientific on the grounds that it either presupposed or invariably drew the self-same conclusion as Christian theology, that Christianity was fundamentally different from all other religions, thus, in the last analysis, beyond compare.¹⁵⁵

She explains that many theologians took the “comparative” approach as little more than a means to further prove Christianity’s superiority and universality. This leads to the construction of other

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

religions as mere descriptions of what they lack when compared to Christianity. For example, comparative theologians did not compare the content of theological beliefs within Islam to the theological beliefs in Protestant Christianity. Such a comparison is too threatening to the dominant status of Protestant Christianity. In other words, such a comparison threatens to weaken the unique claims of Protestant Christianity. Rather, Islam is described as a “newer” religion that was an obvious *perversion* of the Christian narrative.¹⁵⁶ One comparative theologian even describes Islam as a “stillborn” religion.¹⁵⁷ In other words, it was dead upon arrival. One fear is that categorizing all religions under a single genus cannot account for the uniqueness of Christianity. It threatens the long held assumptions that there is true religion that is uniquely mature, rational, and civilized. Therefore, comparative theology arises not as an intellectual endeavor to better understand the people of the world and their religious worldviews. Rather, it arose to further discredit non-Christian perspectives and to more firmly establish a “natural” hierarchy among the religions of the world.

In many ways, Buddhism stands out as the one “world religion” that is arguably mis-categorized as such. Many contemporary definitions of religion struggle to incorporate various forms of Buddhism that do not incorporate a belief in a god or gods. However, Masuzawa tells us that Buddhism is one of the very first “other” groups recognized by European scholars (and thus, “the West”) as a legitimate religion.¹⁵⁸ It is recognized before Judaism, before Islam, as

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 188. “The nineteenth century discovery of the Indo-European lineage undermined this basic assumption [that Judaism is the older, underdeveloped, fossilized, hence limited universalism, while Islam was the later perversion, break-away movement, amounting to a renegade universalism]. In the new, philologically informed perspective, the triune [Jewish-Christian-Islamic] ensemble became a questionable alliance at best, and in the meantime, a hitherto unknown rival had appeared on the horizon.” Ibid., 188.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 120-122.

well as many other “world religions,” including Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc. Buddhism contains all of the appropriate elements; there is a founder, sacred scriptures, moral teachings, and so on. It appears to naturally fit the mould. However, what we come to find is that each of these elements was constructed or invented and not merely discovered. That is, the various texts that have come to be known as the “Buddhist scriptures” were largely absent from most Buddhist communities. It is not until European Protestant expansion and colonialism that they become elevated to a place of high importance. Likewise, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was not a central, uniting figure amongst various “Buddhist” communities before their Western discovery. It is only after European Protestants “discover” these various loosely affiliated communities that such elements become central aspects of a single religion known as “Buddhism.” In other words, European Protestants assumed that all religions naturally share a common set of basic elements, which include a founder, scriptures, moral teachings, etc. In this way, Buddhism was constructed and transformed to fit the categorical standards set by Protestant Europeans. Where practices do not fit these European ideals or standards, Europeans would explain that there once existed a truer or purer form of Buddhism in the past. Once this is pointed out, Protestants could help Buddhists re-discover their own heritage.¹⁵⁹ Thus, Buddhism becomes elevated to the level of “world religion” because it transcends ethnic or racial boundaries. That is, unlike Judaism, which is confined to an ethnic people, Buddhism has universal reach; it was not confined to any one group. Also, the people of India who were “discovered” to be practicing “Buddhism” predominantly spoke variations of Sanskrit and other Aryan-rooted languages (hence Buddhism’s mature philosophical and intellectual positions and its ability to have universal reach). What we are left with, then, is a Western invention: Protestant-ized Buddhism.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 129.

Islam, Masuzawa explains, was treated quite differently. While Buddhism was not considered a theological, political, or military threat to European Christians, Islam was a different story. Islam is rooted in the Semitic language of Arabic. Because of this, Islam is understood to be limited and thus inferior. That is, people were thought to be only as intellectually and morally capable as their language allowed them to be. Semitic languages, due to their lack of inflection, were seen as immature and limited. This extends to the people and the religion in general. Semitic languages are assumed to be tied to an ethnicity or to a nation, so the religion too is incapable of rising to the status of a universal religion. Thus, while Islam shares many of the obvious Protestant criteria for defining the religious, (such as a founder, scriptures, moral teachings, etc.), Islam is not valued as a universal religion. Despite the fact that Islam is a transnational and multiethnic phenomenon, theologians and religious scholars were wary of including it in their comparative studies. Rather than engage and thus validate their status as a world religion, theologians and scholars interpreted its transnationalism and multiethnic expressions as a result of its political and military strength, not its potential universalism.¹⁶⁰

The point in all of this is that as religions become adopted under the category of “world religions,” they are done so with a firm, though obfuscated, hierarchy attached. That is, while Islam was eventually considered a world religion, it is still considered inferior in many ways (due to both comparative theological endeavors as well as philological classificatory systems). As the classification of “world religions” has lasted, few scholars question the way in which it has come to be as we know it now. Masuzawa’s point is that while the list of world religions seems to be a mere description of various world phenomena that are all species of the genus religion, there remains an internal hierarchy and exclusivism. In order to be considered a world

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 179-182.

religion, it must conform to a variety of Protestant standards and respond to a number of Protestant concerns. Moving beyond the old classificatory system to modern discourses on pluralism does not eliminate the exclusivism and hierarchy. Rather, they remain present and are now hidden behind a veil of neutrality and inclusivity, which make them even more powerful.

Another major component of Masuzawa's insights that I have perhaps not made explicit enough is the fact that all of these endeavors – the classification of world religions, the comparative theological work done in the 19th century in Europe, the advent of pluralism – contribute to the assumption that religion is a natural phenomenon that is found in all cultures and in all times. That is, there are religions out in the world to be discovered and academics should continue studying them, especially in comparing them to each other. This is one of the fundamental assumptions of secularization theory; in order for sociologists to trace the decline of *a* phenomenon, it must be transhistorical. That is, secularization theory holds that religion is a transhistorical phenomenon that can be measured over time. Masuzawa explains that this very assumption is a post-Enlightenment invention. She points out that very few things can be appropriately categorized as “universals”; given her insight to the construction of the category of “religion” and “world religions,” we ought to favor, whenever possible, the particularity of various human expressions over the simpler task of generalizing.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, when we resign to the logic of “religious studies” we are subscribing to certain configurations of power that are still present in our modern discourses. This is what she means when she concludes that our task is “a matter of being historical *differently*.”¹⁶² Scholars must recognize their own historicities - the ways in which they contribute to the perpetuation of problematic historical developments.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 188-189.

¹⁶² Ibid., 21.

Instead of moving forward by searching for more answers to an already contaminated set of questions and assumptions, they ought to look back at these questions and assumption to see if they too need to be reexamined.

Secularization theories not only rely upon a problematic and largely unrepresentative category of religion; they also reinforce a historical construction of the religious and the secular that have political and ethical ramifications. In short, when one perpetuates the assumption that the religious and the secular are natural and neutrally descriptive terms, it obfuscates dimensions of power involved by privileging the particularly Western construction and historical use of the categories. It is for these reasons that I introduce the work of Tisa Wenger and David Chidester, whose works demonstrate the political and ethical dimensions in the historical construction and utilization of the categories of the religious and the secular.

Tisa Wenger, a historian of religion, claims that religion, at least in the post-Enlightenment West, has largely been understood as “a matter of individual conscience and belief.”¹⁶³ She tells the story of a 1920s controversy involving Pueblo Indians and the U.S. government, wherein questions of religious freedom and rights faced altogether unprecedented challenges. In short, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico regularly participated in a ritual dance that the U.S. government did not condone; the Bureau of Indian Affairs actively sought to stop the dances from occurring because they deemed them to be “immoral,” “degrading,” and “savage.”¹⁶⁴ These dances were either stopped with force or extinguished through a process of “education” and “civility.” Desperate to defend their sacred dance, the Pueblo Indians (with the help of some Euro-Americans) claimed that the dance was a “religious” practice, in hopes to

¹⁶³ Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, xiii.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7, 143-145.

achieve constitutional protection under the First Amendment's free exercise clause.¹⁶⁵ This section will look at the ways in which the category of religion has been used as a tool of power to further marginalize non-Western communities. Religion, in the American context, assumes a construct of "rights" that is incompatible with many forms of non-Western religions, namely, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. In other words, the liberalism that is inherent in America's conception of religion is antagonistically oriented to the communalism of many Native Americans. Therefore, when the Pueblo Indians are eventually granted religious status, they unwittingly place themselves in a paradoxical position and are forced to re-imagine their entire self-identity. This process, I claim, effectively forces the Pueblo Indians to conform, in large part, to the dominant Western culture of liberalism.

Wenger depicts this antagonism when she writes, "This book demonstrates that many Pueblo leaders began to regularly apply 'religion' to their indigenous ceremonies as a result of the dance controversy – a redefinition that proved advantageous in the fight against government suppression but hard to reconcile with older cultural norms."¹⁶⁶ She claims that the result of this is a discursive and conceptual shift among the Pueblo that eventually leads to the end of a Christian monopoly on "American conceptions of legitimate religion."¹⁶⁷ However, she also successfully shows the ways in which the Pueblo must conform to present (Protestant Western) standards in order to be recognized in the first place – a process that has a *permanent* effect on the Pueblo's self-identity. She explains that,

Pueblo Indians had long understood their tribal ceremonies as a kind of community work, in the same category as maintaining the irrigation ditches and cleaning the public spaces

¹⁶⁵ Wenger explains that "cultural modernists" came to the aid of the Pueblo in order to preserve the "primitive nature" of the group for purposes of art and writing (perhaps as a form of exoticism).

¹⁶⁶ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 5.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

– all of which provide mutual benefits and must therefore be shared in one way or another by all members of the tribe. This understanding of ceremonial participation clashed with Euro-American ideas of “religion” as a distinct sphere of life and with the Enlightenment ideal of a free individual conscience that had shaped the U.S. Constitution’s provisions on religion.¹⁶⁸

Religion takes on a new meaning for the Pueblo once they begin to appeal for religious status. They begin to re-imagine their own community in ways that no longer make sense within their traditional communal structure. This newly acquired conception of religion, that which is predicated on the notion of individual conscience, is unable to functionally coincide with a communal sense of rights, duty, and participation.

Those who decided to defend the dance ceremony on *religious* grounds opened up the door to all that accompanies the Euro-American conception of religion. “At least in public debate,” Wenger writes, “the redefinition of the ceremonies as ‘religion’ subtly undermined the communal and holistic ideals of that tradition.”¹⁶⁹ While Wenger is reticent to say whether or not this shift is positive or negative, it is difficult to overlook the power dynamics at play. The dominant Euro-American conception of “rights” and “religion” become the norm by which the Pueblo are forced to react to. On the one hand, Pueblo tribes were able to successfully retain certain rights (such as being able to perform the dance ceremony); on the other hand, however, they are forced to re-imagine their own community in a way that separates religion from other spheres that make up their collective identity. In doing so, the Pueblo tribes can no longer force participation among their community members in religious activities because, as a liberal constitutional state, *individual* rights are protected over communal rights. Forcing such participation would be to force someone to practice a religion. Again, religion is understood to

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

be an individual choice, as opposed to a communal way of life. Given the extreme differences in how each group understands rights, once the Pueblo decided to adopt religious status they opened themselves up to an onslaught of expectations and ideals which did not coalesce with their own self-identity. Something had to change.

Wenger proceeds by showing the ways in which a variety of court cases involving Native Americans “reflect the incompatibility between Native Americans and Euro-Americans conceptions of [...] religion. The basic principles of the American legal system make it difficult for judges to view religion as anything but a particular sphere of human beliefs and activities.”¹⁷⁰ We come to learn that such incompatibilities also extend to disputes over land, which ultimately function to unveil principle differences in the way each group understands the sacred. “Native Americans have traditionally considered the natural world and its creatures not as objects to be owned but as living beings that must be treated with respect, and with whom the people must interact for various purposes.”¹⁷¹ While there are earnest struggles to protect the rights and ideals of certain Native America groups, such a task is simply impossible. A liberal constitutional government cannot guarantee communal rights or religious freedom by expanding the scope of what it intends to protect. As we have seen in the case of the Pueblo Indians, efforts to expand the category of religion disclose deeper, more fundamental problems. Religion is intimately related to political conceptions of rights, and any attempt to welcome in “others” is to extend the invitation to conform to the ideas of those in power.

This section also takes a brief look at the *moral* implications of the historical construction of the category of religion. Even for those who eschew narrowly Protestant and Western

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 254.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 252.

definitions of religion are faced with a set of ethical questions; the open-endedness to which religion can be redefined ultimately favors those who are in power to do the redefining. David Chidester's book, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, explores the complex and disturbing history of European colonization in southern Africa. He explains that "comparative religion" was not only done in the offices of Universities by learned scholars; the category of religion was constructed and reconstructed on the frontier and battlefield of European-African conflict. He writes, "Comparisons were not merely intellectual exercises. They were entangled in the European conquest and subjugation of Africans."¹⁷² In brief, Chidester argues that "European recognition of an indigenous African religion [...] depended upon colonial domination."¹⁷³ In other words, when Europeans had secure control over the natives, they were willing to grant them religious status. When they were in battle, however, the Europeans would strategically deny their religious identity in order to justify their (otherwise immoral) behavior in conflict.¹⁷⁴

Chidester explains four prominent ways the colonialists justified the domination and exploitation of various native southern African communities: the native Africans are less human than Europeans, and thus do not have the same rights; they are degenerates, and thus need the European missionaries to remind them of their God and civility that they have lost; they are also not native to this land, and thus have no prior right to it; and lastly, such savage systems around the world are the work of Satan, therefore, they must be defeated and converted to Christianity and the ways of the West.¹⁷⁵ In all four ways, religion is used as a tool which is constructed to

¹⁷² Chidester, *Savage Systems*, 219.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 171, 184, 235.

manipulate the stakes in favor of the European colonialists. He does not think abandoning the terms “religion” and “religions” will fix the problems of the past (or present); rather, he proposes that the category of religion always be open to redefinition (or that we become open to its open redefinition.) He writes, “A redefinition of definition itself has led to proposals for an open, multiple, or polythetic definition of religion.” He goes on to say, “As a cluster concept, religion signifies an open set of discursive, practical, and social strategies of symbolic and material negotiation.”¹⁷⁶ At first glance this seems like an appropriate solution to the many problems of “expanding” the category of religion. However, one of the main problems of colonialism in southern Africa is the openness to which one group is able to define and redefine religion. An equal distribution of power rarely (if ever) exists in controversies regarding religious legitimacy. In other words, because religion was so open to redefinition, it became easy for Europeans to grant and withhold religious status in order to best serve their political interests and justify any moral qualms they faced.

The category of religion is complicated and messy. Hundreds of definitions exist, all of which rely upon a set of criteria that include some groups and excludes others. A recent development of academic literature has successfully pointed out many problems in relying on narrow, essentialist definitions of religion; rather than rely on such categories, they advocate for a pluralistic notion of religion.¹⁷⁷ While religious pluralism takes on many forms, it commonly entails expanding the category of religion to include more groups as legitimately “religious.” This increasingly inclusive trend *appears* to be more tolerant and self-reflexive. However, we also see historical instances where such inclusive motivations acted in an opposite manner; the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 259.

¹⁷⁷ For example, look at the work of John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

appearance of pluralism can function to legitimize relatively narrow definitions of religion as well as the will of those in power. Therefore, we must not obsess ourselves only with the question of *who* is included. Rather, we must spend more time questioning *how* groups become recognized as religious. This is one problem with modern secularization theories; they tend to rely upon definitions without serious consideration of the historical and ethical constructions therein.

It is a common practice, we are learning, to engage in the process of classification and comparison when studying religion. Scholars employ definitions as attempts to describe a variety of religious phenomena that can be found throughout the world. We rely upon categorical distinctions and definitions all of the time in religious studies, but as we can see, there are some conceptual problems with this trend. Jonathan Z. Smith, the late renowned historian of religion, explains that definitions and categories employed in religious studies are not mere descriptions of naturally present phenomena. Rather, these definitions and categories, which are *presented* as neutral descriptions, are prescriptive in nature.¹⁷⁸ He explains when he writes,

Technical, or subject-field dictionaries, such as a dictionary of religion, are a different matter. In principle, they are prescriptive; they oppose the statistical or historical reportage of lexical definitions with *précising* or theoretical definitions that often counter common usage and are persuasive rather than descriptive.¹⁷⁹

In other words, prominent definitions of religion are not only inconsistent with its historical forms, but also with the numerous contemporary instantiations.

One problem with general classificatory systems is that they are often founded in problematic modes of distinction. On such distinction is the differences marked between

¹⁷⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 164.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

“universal” religions and “ethnic” or “local” religions. Smith explains that this creates an implicit us/them distinction. There are *our* universal, true religions which can be distinguished from *their* particular, local, most likely “false” religions. Talking more specifically about the taxonomy of “world religions,” he adds,

The fact is that there is no satisfactory way of classifying these traditions. Neither geographical nor linguistic groupings have proved fruitful or gained wide assent. Until such is developed, we will continue to use prescientific categories, largely lumping these folk together by the putative absence among them of cultural indicators we associate with ourselves.¹⁸⁰

That is to say, other non-Western religions are defined insofar as what they lack when compared to European Christianity.

Another mode of distinction is to differentiate the “world religions” by supposed time of existence. That is, on the one hand we have ancient religions and on the other hand, new religions. The former group would include traditions like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism while the latter includes various Christian-like groups, but only those that have not recognized as worthy enough to be considered actual Christianity. Smith tells us that there is no coherent chronological way to divide the religions as they naturally exist. Given this fact, it makes more sense to understand such classifications as an expression of some other qualification.

The next classificatory model was presented by philologist Max Müller, whose early “scientific” approach to organizing the people of the world we encountered in previous chapters. Again, this stemmed from the notion that all things in the world could be scientifically classified. There is the implicit assumption that there is something called “religion” – the genus - that

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 173.

naturally exists in the world and which has multiple faith expressions, or species.¹⁸¹ This being the case, the religions of the world could be classified in a non-biased, scientific way. Through a classification of the world's languages, we could understand the roots of various modern religious cultures. In addition to a variety of erroneous scientific assumptions, Smith's problem is that this assumes a degree of generality and universality that does not correlate to the particularity of various religions and cultural expressions in the world. Also, Smith points out that to classify in the manner that Müller did proves to be more of a system of conquering than unbiased classification.¹⁸²

Aware of these problems, Smith still finds value in classifications. He explains that there are better and worse ways of classifying. This is why he discusses the various problems of classification again and again; there are a number of things scholars ought to avoid doing. However, we cannot simply avoid thinking in categorical terms. Our processes of thinking would be entirely chaotic without the use of categories. It is for these reasons that Smith suggests that when categorizing is unavoidable, it ought to be done with more care and attention to the potential errors in doing so. It is thus better to apply multiple taxonomies to cross-cut each other in an effort to find more specificity in the phenomenon. He writes,

To be so generous is to run the risk of losing that very partiality, that casting of particular features into bold relief, those tensions of similarity and difference that give rise to thought. Scholarly labor is a disciplined exaggeration in the direction of knowledge; taxonomy is a valuable tool in achieving that necessary direction.¹⁸³

For example, in the unavoidable reliance upon categories, scholars ought to avoid binaries, for very rarely is any set of phenomena situated in such dichotomous relation to each other. One way

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 174.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 175.

of avoiding this is to employ multiple taxonomical approaches that cut across each other. This approach will lead to more specificity and avoid generalities.

The term religion has meant very different things in different communities throughout history.¹⁸⁴ To some it meant customs, to others ritual. In the medieval European Catholic era, the term “religious” referred to priests in the cloisters or monastery walls while “secular” referred to the priests who worked with lay people.¹⁸⁵ To most Catholics, both would be considered religious today. The point is that “the religious” has no consistent or universal, transhistorical, transcultural meaning. The Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment marks a shift in the way in which religion is defined in Europe. In short, religion becomes understood as an orthodoxic, rather than an orthopraxic, orientation to the word. The autonomy and individualism of Protestantism focuses more on what people *believe* over what people *do*. Thus, religion comes to be primarily associated with a set of beliefs about the natural world and religious claims are increasingly subjected to the critical analysis of Enlightenment philosophers. Religious questions about non-Protestant and non-Western groups, Smith points out, are often both posed and answered by European Protestants. Again, religion is presumed to be a natural phenomenon (the genus) of which there are multiple manifestations (species, or religions). This gives birth to “natural religion,” the idea that religion is essentially a natural phenomenon that is differentiated by its various and particular cultural expressions.¹⁸⁶ This leads to much of the pluralism discourses that are prevalent today. It is the idea that religion is something that is everywhere and at all times and that the differences between religions are not a matter of truth or falsity, per se, but rather of cultural expression. Smith explains when he writes,

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 182-183.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 182.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 183.

The essentially anthropological project of describing natural religion privileged similarity, often expressed by claims of universality or innateness; the explanation of difference was chiefly historical, whether it emphasized progressive or degenerative processes. This double enterprise had the effect of blurring distinctions between questions of truth and questions of origins.¹⁸⁷

This is also what Smith means when he says that religion has shifted from theology to anthropology. The theological enterprise, which directed the discourses on religion for so long, were primarily concerned with the truth (or falsity) of religions. History was conceived of as a supernatural sequence of events which some groups (notably Christianity, and mostly *Protestant* Christianity) were most privy to. The anthropological shift, Smith explains, is when history is no longer conceived in this fashion, but rather as a sequence of human constructions. Religion becomes a distinct human expression that is not tied up with questions of truth or falsity. Religion comes to be defined in many ways, each differing from the next; however, the point is that religion is understood as a set of ideas, or beliefs, or actions, or rituals, or symbols, or expressions that are *secondary* to a more fundamental human experience. It becomes one form of human experience or expression that can be differentiated from other human expressions or experiences. This is the object of the religious studies scholar, who now occupies an academic discipline that is distinctly separable from other theological enterprises.

Furthermore, Smith argues that the academic perspective does not have a monopoly on defining religion. Beyond the university, the category of religion is constructed in courtrooms across America. In a chapter titled, “God Save This Honorable Court,”¹⁸⁸ he explains that the United States Constitution dictates, in many ways, how religion is understood and studied in America. Or, in his words, “What ever religion ‘is’, its definition seems to be thought to lie with

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 375.

others – with courts and practitioners – and not with the academic field charged with its study.”¹⁸⁹ The court’s decision on what counts as religion can have larger consequences than do the decisions or input of religious studies scholars. He looks at the ways in which religious organizations qualify as religious in order to secure tax-exempt status. On this matter he explains that “The [IRS] is, both de facto and de jure America’s primary definer and classifier of religion.”¹⁹⁰

In many of these judicial decision-making processes, we see that Christianity becomes the standard by which other religious traditions are measured against. Christianity is the “prototype,” as he calls it, by which to compare all other applications for legal recognition. Smith describes this tendency as a process of translating the unfamiliar to the familiar. In short, the court tends to Christianize the other in an attempt to make sense of the unknown. Smith provides an example when he introduces the Supreme Court case, *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. Hialeah* (1993), a decision that sought to understand, among other things, the Santerian practice of animal sacrifice. “What Justice Kennedy has undertaken,” Smith explains, “is an essay in familiarization, largely enabled by the deployment of a Christian prototype. That which initially appeared strange – Santerian animal sacrifice – has been reduced to an instance of the known.”¹⁹¹ What appears strange in other traditions are compared to more familiar traditions (most often Judaism and Christianity) in order to draw parallels between the two. If a parallel can be drawn, the practice or tradition is much more likely to be considered religious. Noticeable difference is either expunged or re-formulated in a way that makes more sense to Western-minded judges and academics. Because this process is so prevalent and damaging to meaningful

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 375.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 382.

difference, Smith tells us that as scholars and academics of religion, we must do more to improve these acts of translation. Such differences, he admits, must be negotiated to the extent that they can be understood by those who they seem too strange to understand; but at the same time, he tells us, difference must never be overcome. This would be going well beyond ‘translation’ and into the scope of transformation.¹⁹²

This process of translation and transformation deeply affects secularization theory; as we will see in the following chapters, the very criteria by which religiosity (the presence of and force of religion) is measured has undergone a process of transformation at the expense of non-Western forms of meaningful difference. The criteria that are repeatedly used to measure global rates of religiosity are primarily informed by a set of Protestant Christian assumptions about what it means to be religious. Examples of these criteria are “frequency of prayer,” “belief in God,” “belief in heaven and hell,” “frequency of attendance of religious service,” and “church membership.”¹⁹³ I am arguing that the privileging of such criteria not only calls into question the efficacy of such studies, but it also prioritizes the process of translation and transformation at the expense of recognizing meaningful difference.

A Parallel Argument: William T. Cavanaugh on Religion and Violence

As I stated in the opening chapter, William T. Cavanaugh is a professor of theology who, in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence*, analyzes a number of “religion-and-violence” arguments. He concludes that such arguments are generally incoherent but that they remain useful for legitimizing various forms of secular violence. I introduce his work for a number of

¹⁹² Ibid., 389.

¹⁹³ Cooperman, Smith, and Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 7.

reasons. First, I am making a parallel argument; that is, I engage a number of secularization theories in order to demonstrate their various limitations, including their inability to accurately or consistently measure the presence of religion across space and time. To be clear, I am not arguing that secularization theories are similarly incoherent; rather, I am arguing that they rely upon Western, post-Enlightenment, Protestant constructions of the category of religion that are largely non-representative. A brief presentation of Cavanaugh's argument will help frame the following chapter, which will look directly at such secularization theories.

Second, in the course of his research, Cavanaugh examines the construction and employment of the religious-secular dichotomy. I agree with him when he argues that the reliance upon a universal, transhistorical, and transcultural category of "religion" that is analytically separable from other "secular" phenomena serves to obfuscate potential political motivations in deploying particularly Western, Protestant notions of the religious.¹⁹⁴ I also agree with his conclusion that it is therefore problematic (he uses the term "incoherent") to claim that such a phenomenon ("religion") can be appropriately or consistently isolated in a social-scientific study.¹⁹⁵ This is not to say that various forms of religion cannot be the focus of a variety of social surveys or social-scientific studies. The problem is when religion is presented as a singular and universally representative transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon. He explains that many "religion-and-violence" arguments claim that religion is more prone to violence than a variety of secular phenomena (the modern liberal nation-state, e.g.).¹⁹⁶ In short, I am arguing that a number of secularization theories assume as much when it comes to the object of their study ("religion"), and it therefore calls their conclusions into question.

¹⁹⁴ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 141-150.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-7.

Lastly, I look to Cavanaugh because this dissertation, like his book, concludes that there are likely ulterior (political) motivations undergirding the entire discourse. For Cavanaugh, it is that the religious has been constructed as the irrational, private realm of personal beliefs in contradistinction to the rational, public, universal realm of the secular sphere. This myth of religious violence is materialized in the Western construction of the “religious other,” who is prone to fanaticism and unwilling to separate religion from politics. Therefore, not only are religious acts of violence considered illegitimate, they also serve to divert moral scrutiny away from other kinds of (secular) violence. Or worse, they actually function to *legitimize* them. In other words, Cavanaugh contends that “religion-and-violence” arguments serve an unstated purpose. As religious acts of violence are understood to be irrational and barbaric, secular forms of violence are considered rational and necessary for preserving civilization. *Our* rational violence is needed to combat irrational and barbaric threats to our civilization. In a similar manner, I argue that a number of secularization theories, even when incapable of representing and/or measuring the broad, complex and multitudinous category of religion, continue to serve other political and theological motivations that are otherwise divorced from such social-scientific research.

The point is not to conclude that because religion is a complex and multitudinous concept we ought to conclude that there is no problem of “religion and violence.” Rather, Cavanaugh argues that when we rely upon the assumed relationship between religion and violence, other forms of meaningful relationships between violence and individual or state actors are overlooked.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, assumptions about the nature of religion and violence should be avoided altogether. Instead of searching for what types of violence should be appropriately

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 17.

categorized as “religious” or “secular,” for example, scholars ought to be asking what configurations of power are being authorized by such discourses. In a similar sense, I do not argue that because the religious and the secular are inherently complex and multitudinous concepts, there is no such thing as secularization or religious revivalism. Rather, I emphasize that the distinctions made between the two are more indicative of political configurations than they are about any shift in observed religiosity. This may appear to contradict an earlier statement of mine, where I said that social-scientific surveys and research are incapable of accurately and consistently measuring religiosity. For the sake of clarity, allow me to say a few more words on this point before moving forward with Cavanaugh. In the simplest terms, I am arguing that secularization theories have bitten off more than they can chew. They overwhelmingly seek to measure and explain the presence of religion in general, a category that is irreconcilable unto itself. That is, there is no definition that can serve the rigorous demands of social-scientific research on religion. If the surveyor or social theorist decides to limit the scope of her study, then such problems *begin* to diminish. However, as I stated in the very beginning of this dissertation, and which will be the focus of the following chapter, secularization theory seeks to generalize. Its conclusions are about the state of religion and not, for example, on the trends of Southern American Catholics attending Mass over the past 100 years, or the Navajo belief in the Fourth World, or Jain commitments to *ahimsa* in the 21st century. These, I will argue, are not free of such concerns, but they have a greater potential for producing clearer, more accurate conclusions on *some measures*.

In the first few pages of his book *The Myth of Religious Violence*, William Cavanaugh explains the title when he writes, “What I call the ‘myth of religious violence’ is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from

‘secular’ features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence.”¹⁹⁸ The myth of religious violence, in other words, is the notion that religion is a distinct aspect of human life that is more prone to violence than other, secular aspects of society. It assumes that religion is a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon that is more inclined to violence than, say, the modern nation-state, economic entities, or political ideologies. There is *something* about religion itself that makes it more violent. We see this throughout our academic literature, media reports, polemic treatises, and op-eds. Because of this widespread belief, the state is thought to be the apparatus that must suppress religion and its violent tendencies. Because of this apparent relationship, the modern nation-state is understood to be the neutral arbiter between the duty to secure its peoples’ rights and protecting them against the dangers of religious belief put into action.

Cavanaugh writes, “I argue that there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion and that essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence are incoherent.”¹⁹⁹ He explains that religion is not transhistorical because the category or term religion has meant very different things at different points in history. In the medieval period, for example, the distinction between the religious and secular was one made from within the church about priests.²⁰⁰ Secular priests were not non-religious, as the terms would assume now; rather, secular priests worked outside the cloisters with lay people, while “religious” priests worked within the cloisters or monasteries on ritual matters with God. In modernity, the religious became a distinct sphere of its own, separated from other, distinctly secular spheres, such as politics,

¹⁹⁸ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 3-4.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 64.

economics, medicine, law, and education. Prior to these distinctions, made in the modern liberal nation-state, it would make no sense to speak of non-religious matters in the way we do now.

The problem is that there was no category of religion separable from such political institutions until the modern era, and then it was primarily in the West. What meaning could we give to either the claim that Roman religion is to blame for the imperialist violence of ancient Rome, or the claim that it is Roman politics and not Roman religion that is to blame? Either claim would be nonsensical, because there is no neat division between religion and politics; Roman *religio* was inextricable from duty to the emperor and to the gods of Roman civic life.²⁰¹

His point is that the category of religion and its relationship to other assumed spheres has changed over time. The problem, he points out, is not simply that there is a natural evolution taking place. The problem is that when we speak of religion in these essentialist ways, we ignore the ways in which the category itself has changed.

As I stated earlier, Cavanaugh engages a number of “religion-and-violence” arguments so as to demonstrate their general incoherence. One such theory is that offered by Charles Kimball who introduces his book, *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* with the following claim, “It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.”²⁰² He then recalls a similar claim offered by Leroy Rouner in his edited collection, *Religion, Politics, Peace* when he writes, “Religion has probably been the single most significant cause of warfare in human history...”²⁰³ Cavanaugh is showing the frequency and abundance of such claims in modern academia, but then he immediately points out that “Neither author makes

²⁰¹ Ibid., 60-61.

²⁰² Ibid., 60; Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 1.

²⁰³ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 60.

any attempt to support these claims with empirical evidence.’’²⁰⁴ He seems to be suggesting that it is common for academics in the 21st century to not only assume that there is a positive correlative relationship between religion and violence, but that such assumptions are frequently used as tools for understanding other phenomena. Cavanaugh explains that the...

futility of this approach can be seen if we replace the world religion with politics in Kimball’s and Rouner’s claims. Is it helpful to say that politics has caused more violence in history than any other institutional force? There is a certain initial plausibility to this idea – wars have usually been instigated by kings, princes, and so on – but when we ask “Politics, as opposed to what?” we quickly see how pointless the claim is.²⁰⁵

His point, I take it, is that reliance upon broad, general categories such as “religion” or “politics” is not only anachronistic or historically and culturally deficient, such a reliance serves to obfuscate the underlying nature of the focus of the investigation. In other words, by relying upon “religion” as a motivating force for violence does little to explain any specific instance of violence and may even cloud the nuances that are otherwise available to the one doing the investigation. Cavanaugh looks briefly to the contributions of John Hick when he says that even Hick, “who explicitly denies that religion has an essence, nevertheless continues to treat ancient Theravada Buddhism and contemporary Pentecostalism equally as religions. The assumption is that, in ancient Sri Lanka or in contemporary Houston, *one may identify the religion or religions of the inhabitants by looking for certain kinds of beliefs and practice* [italics mine].”²⁰⁶ This is one of the main criticisms I have with a majority of contemporary secularization theories. Many of them (especially the ones introduced in the following chapter) ignore such concerns in favor of a fluid, generalized, natural, universal, transcultural and transhistorical category of religion that is assumed to more or less represent religiosity throughout the world.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 61.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 61-62.

Cavanaugh then looks to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who explains that, when looking across linguistic cultures and throughout history, we find no equivalent term for religion.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, the term *religio* (Latin root for the English term “religion”) has itself referred to various aspects of life throughout history and across cultures. It most probably derived from the word *re-ligare*, which means to “re-bind” or “reestablish a bond that has been severed.” Note, for example, the lack of any reference to “belief” or actions of institutions based on the existence of supernatural entities (Steve Bruce’s preferred definition).²⁰⁸ This is not to say that any one of these definitions more accurately describes the essence of religion. Rather, it is to say that there is no essence of religion that can be traced through time and across cultures. Cavanaugh continues when he looks to St. Augustine’s use of the term *religio*, who defines *religiones* (religions) in the following way. “Let not our religion be the worship of human works.... Let not our religion be the worship of lands and waters,”²⁰⁹ which Cavanaugh understands to mean that for Augustine religion “is not contrasted with some sort of secular realm of activity.”²¹⁰ Religion, in the time of Augustine, “referred more commonly to devotion in human relationships, especially among friends” and less commonly to the “one true God.”²¹¹

As previously mentioned, Cavanaugh then explains that the term religion is used quite differently in the medieval period than it is in many (but not all) discourses today. He again looks to the contributions of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who observes, “It is nowadays customary to think of this [medieval] period as the most ‘religious’ in the history of Christendom. Despite this or because of it, throughout the whole Middle Ages no one, as far as I have been able to

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁰⁸ Bruce, *Secularization*, 1.

²⁰⁹ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 63.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

ascertain, ever wrote a book specifically on ‘religion.’”²¹² What should we conclude from Smith’s observation? I take it to mean that religion is not conceived of as a universal or distinct sphere of life that is separable from other more secular spheres. If religion is part and parcel of any number of other aspects of public and private life, it would not make sense to attempt to isolate “it” in such a manner. After surveying a number of other historical examples that demonstrate the ways in which religion is either lacking completely or has been understood differently from contemporary definitions, Cavanaugh begins to outline the process by which the category of religion is shaped by the emergence of the modern nation-state. He writes,

With the dawn of modernity a new concept with a much wider and different significance came to operate under the term religion. Religion in modernity indicates a universal genus of which the various religions are species; each religion comes to be demarcated by a system of propositions; religion is identified with an essentially interior, private impulse; and religion comes to be seen as essentially distinct from secular pursuits such as politics, economics, and the like.²¹³

It is this modern reconstruction of the category of religion that allows secularization theories to make assumptions about the breadth and nature of religiosity. Because the category of religion is being defined by Western powers (academics, legal and political theorists, theologians, etc.) in a predominantly Protestant Christian society, its construction assumes many Protestant Christian criteria.²¹⁴ One such criterion is the emerging belief that because the essence of Christianity is a matter of personal faith, its proper place in the modern nation-state is in the private sphere. I contend that this is a direct result of the resurgence of Pauline Christianity found in the Protestant Reformation. Because Luther and Calvin emphasized (in different ways) that a proper orientation to Christianity need not be mediated by the public institution of the Catholic Church, religion’s

²¹² Ibid., 64.

²¹³ Ibid., 69.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 74.

proper place is perceived to be in the private sphere. The Reformation leads to an overarching assumption found in modern secularization theory that religion is best understood first and foremost as a set of *beliefs* held by individuals. This gives rise, as we will see, to the secular realm: “a pairing which will gradually remove the practice of Christian *religio* from central place in the social order of the West.”²¹⁵ Now, a casual reader might interpret this as the process of secularization itself; however, that would be a misreading of Cavanaugh’s statement. Rather, he is saying that with the rise of the modern nation-state, we see the emergence of a newly formed public sphere: the secular. This has a significant impact on “Christianity *religio*” in that the forms of Christianity that existed prior to this distinction can no longer exist *in the same way*. That is, with the introduction of public secular spheres such as medicine, politics, law, economics, etc., religion is manufactured into its own supposed sphere. However, in the following chapter we will see arguments – most notably by sociologist José Casanova - that not only is this a primarily Western way to conceive of religion, but that religion does not simply accept this newly defined place.²¹⁶ The point is that this development gives way to the logic that religion is something that can be distinctly and analytically separated from other, secular phenomena. Or, as Cavanaugh puts it, “After 1600, it became easier to speak of religion in general, although it was usually used to refer to ‘the Christian religion,’ which indicated” that there were other religions that are false.²¹⁷

Let us return briefly to the influences of John Locke. Locke encapsulates (and recapitulates) the view that religion is essentially a state of mind, or a set of beliefs. Cavanaugh explains that “Locke draws a distinction between the ‘outward force’ used by the civil magistrate

²¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

²¹⁶ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 1-2.

²¹⁷ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 74.

and the ‘inward persuasion’ of religion.”²¹⁸ He explains that this distinction between inward belief and outward expression is a relatively new way of conceiving of religion and the self. He explains, “This sharp distinction between inward and outward would be unrecognizable in medieval Christendom, where the state of the interior soul was inseparable from the bodily disciplines and rituals that both formed and expressed the dispositions of the soul.”²¹⁹ He goes on to say that Locke concludes that religion is essentially a private matter that ought to be decided by the individual and must therefore be divorced from other public spheres (such as the “magistrate”).²²⁰ He therefore promotes a division of labor between the public enterprises of the state and the private pursuits of the religious sphere. Cavanaugh argues,

In Locke, we find a modern version of the spatial division of the world into religious and secular pursuits. In the medieval period, the *saeculum* (Latin for secular) had both a temporal and spatial dimension; it referred to this world and age, and *saecula saeculorum* was translated in English as “world without end.”²²¹

That which once accounted for all of creation and experience – the secular – gives new reference to that which is distinct from other, religious pursuits. Put more plainly, “the religious-secular binary is a new creation that accompanies the creation of the modern state.”²²² True religion, according to Locke, must be essentially distinct from politics. “Religion is *not* social, *not* coercive, *is* individual, *is* belief-oriented.”²²³ Religion is something that individuals can choose to accept or reject; it does not, and *should not* permeate all aspect of public life.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 78-79.

²²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²²¹ Ibid., 80.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., 84.

In short, Cavanaugh is explaining that the idea of religion “*has a history*.”²²⁴ The point is not that religion has simply shifted or evolved over time; rather, it is that “Christianity *religio*” is not the same thing as religion in the modern world. Cavanaugh explains,

The problem here is not just one of misdescription or anachronism. The deeper problem is that essentialist accounts of religion occlude the way that power is involved in the shifting uses of concepts such as religion. [...] The very claim that the boundaries between religion and nonreligion are natural, eternal, fixed, and immutable *is itself* a part of the new configuration of power that comes about with the rise of the modern state.²²⁵

In other words, it is not as if religion has naturally evolved into something new that appropriately and effectively represents a variety of religious species throughout the modern world. Rather, to continue to speak of religion in this general sense – one that ignores this history – is to allow various forms of power to remain in place. For example, the criticism of Muslims for not separating their religion from their politics is often seen from the point of view that to separate one’s religion from her politics is a sign of maturity. Europe underwent this maturing process of modernization; so, why do (some) Muslims resist? This might make sense to a lot of people if we continue to leave out the power involved in making these distinctions develop. That is, the transition to separate one’s religion from politics is the product of a particular history with particular actors involved who were moving toward particular ends. To generalize or universalize this particularity is to burden those communities that had less power in the development of this particular history. They have histories of their own and any such resistance to the dominant narrative is deemed inappropriate and often religious.

I will say less about the supposed transcultural nature of religion because much of this was previously discussed with reference to Tomoko Masuzawa’s work (which informs

²²⁴ Ibid., 81.

²²⁵ Ibid., 82-83.

Cavanaugh's usage). Cavanaugh explains that the transcultural construction of the category or religion is the product of particularly Western European Protestant assumptions that have been exported throughout the world with colonization. "The concept of religion was introduced was introduced outside the West in the context of European colonization, and the introduction of the concept often served the interests of the colonizers."²²⁶ This exportation (which is a configuration of power that Cavanaugh highlights) has allowed future generations of scholars to assume its universality. That is, when Westerners "discover" religion around the world by imparting its conception of religion onto other communities, various conversions take place, making it appear as if religion is everywhere. Lastly, he remarks,

The idea that there is a transcultural phenomenon called religion that has a dangerous tendency toward violence – and must therefore be domesticated – is not only a misdescription of reality. The idea itself should be interrogated for the kinds of power that it authorizes. The attempt to domesticate certain practices as religion, both at home and abroad, is not innocent of political use.²²⁷

Let us return to the heart of Cavanaugh's argument so we can see the ways in which these historical and genealogical investigations support his overall claim that there is a "myth" of religious violence. Cavanaugh argues that "religion-and-violence" arguments (those arguments that claim that religion *is* more prone to violence than other secular orientations) are part of the broader liberal nation-state agenda. That is, such arguments serve the interests of the state; they not only divert attention away from other forms of violence that the state is committing (war, violence caused by economic sanctions, etc.), but they also act to *justify* state violence, insofar as it is constructed in contradistinction to the barbarity of religious violence. Religious violence is described as irrational, fanatic, indiscriminate, absolutist, and evil. This is contrasted with state

²²⁶ Ibid., 86.

²²⁷ Ibid., 101.

violence, which is presented as rational, precise, level-headed, necessary, and even benevolent. One of Cavanaugh's interests is in how the religious-secular binary has been formed with regard to the idea of violence. He does not argue that the secular counterparts can be as violent as religiously motivated actors; rather, he looks to "how the twin categories of religious and secular are constructed in the first place."²²⁸ He argues that what separates "religion" from "violence" in any context is more dependent on constructs of power than any *natural* division between the two. He explains, "The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject."²²⁹ In the West, this is often employed against Muslim societies:

They have not yet learned to remove the dangerous influence of religion from political life. *Their* violence is therefore irrational and fanatical. *Our* violence, being secular, is rational, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain *their* violence. We find ourselves obliged to bomb them into liberal democracy.²³⁰

The logic of these arguments goes something like this. While religious terrorists enact violence because they are driven by irrational and primitive beliefs in efforts to inappropriately spread the will of their god(s), the state uses violence as a necessary tool to bring peace to the world, and it is always done in the most rational, precise manner possible. This is the real value of the religion-and-violence arguments. They serve a particular purpose for the state and they are contributing to its apparent legitimacy.

Furthermore, Cavanaugh explains that these religion-and-violence arguments are incoherent. "What I challenge as incoherent is the argument that there is something called religion – a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species – which is

²²⁸ Ibid., 3.

²²⁹ Ibid., 4.

²³⁰ Ibid.

necessarily more inclined toward violence than are ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular.”²³¹ Again, he explains that such arguments rely first upon the assumption that the category of religion is analytically distinguishable from other secular phenomena and second that that such a category is more prone to violence than other secular social organizations or institutions. For reasons already stated, he disagrees with both. He argues that the categories of the religious and the secular prove to be much more complex than assumed, so what counts as “religious violence” or “secular violence” often depends more on the configurations of power. For example, the more explanatory route is to ask who is doing the defining, who sets the discourse, and who benefits from the categorizing. I will be making an analogous argument about secularization theorists. In short, the definitions that one chooses for their study is less about how widely applicable or representative such a definition might be and is more indicative of how the surveyor conceives of those surveyed. Furthermore, I will be arguing that the use of such power (of defining) must be taken up more seriously within theories of secularization. If one has the power to decide how to define religion and if such a decision will affect the outcome of the theoretical analysis, then one must take more seriously the exercise of defining. I intend to show that not only is this not being done with the rigor it necessitates, but that ignoring such concerns raises questions about the efficacy and intentions of such studies.

Though Cavanaugh engages a number of “religion-and-violence” arguments in order to demonstrate their general incoherence, I will focus on one. He looks to Mark Juergensmeyer’s argument that religion is more prone to violence because religion divides people. Juergensmeyer argues that religious perspectives on matters of conflict lead to a “cosmic war” scenario, which is

²³¹ Ibid.

where the “other” is cast as ultimate evil. They are “satanized,” as Juergensmeyer puts it.²³² The conflict is elevated beyond its more mundane reality into a cosmic war situation, where the stakes cannot be higher. Cavanaugh argues, however, that the same can be said for politics and that there is nothing unique about religion in this sense. People do not engage in politics merely for the particular issues at hand. Political conflicts are often elevated to the level of symbolic war. Think, for instance of much of the partisan conflict in our country right now. It is not just that democrats and republicans disagree on particular issues (which they do); they cast the other as Satan-like figures who encapsulate all that is wrong with the world (and not just with these particular issues). Cavanaugh’s point is that the religion-is-violence argument that Juergensmeyer forwards is incoherent if the basis of his argument can also be applied to non-religion. There is no meaningful distinction made between the two, so how can he argue that one is more prone to violence than the other? Again, Cavanaugh’s point is not to say that certain theological positions or self-identifying religious groups are not more prone to violence. His point is that looking through the lens of religion is not helpful and is actually working to obfuscate and even justify other forms of violence.²³³

²³² Ibid., 28-29.

²³³ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 29-33. Talal Asad makes a similar argument in his book, *On Suicide Bombing*. Asad heavily criticizes the ease with which many Western politicians, public intellectuals, and journalists justify acts of violence (exemplified in “just war theory”) by appealing to their “advanced” moral perspectives. He points out that what is at stake in much of our modern warfare is not a competing set of incompatible values, such as the “clash of civilizations” thesis forwards; rather, Asad understands the conflict to be “the fight of civilization against the uncivilized.” Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 38. Technological advances have allowed us to distance ourselves from the violence we commit, thus significantly affecting the way we think about death, life, and killing (and in this case, “suicide bombing”). In short, Asad examines the complex political, theological, and sociological factors that contribute to the western delineation of two distinct acts of violence: *war*, which is presented as a legitimate and morally justified action to protect a nation’s way of life; and *terrorism*, which is understood to be an illegal, immoral, and irrational act carried out by uncivilized barbarians. Asad’s aim here is to “disrupt the reader” enough to where “he or she will be able to take a distance from the

Another aspect of Cavanaugh's criticisms that ought to be considered is the role that definitions play in the study of religion. Specifically, he discusses the difference between the substantivist and functionalist approaches. Substantivist definitions of religion tend to be exclusive and restrict the meaning of religion to substance of the tradition, focusing on the content of the beliefs. They often focus on a people's belief in something like "gods" or "karma" or "transcendence."²³⁴ They seek to distinguish that which separates the religious from the secular as being the substance or content of the group. Functionalist definitions of religion tend to expand the category in order to focus on the way the practices and ideologies *function* in the lives of the community or individual. Such definitions often have a difficult time excluding ideologies such as Marxism or nationalism because they function in a similar fashion.

complacent public discourse that prepackages moral responses to terrorism, war, and suicide bombing." (5)

To be clear, though, Asad is not offering moral justifications for suicide bombings (or other terrorist attacks); rather, he is pointing out that many of the violent acts carried out by liberal democracies – acts which are made to be legally and morally justified by international law and "just war theory" – are similarly terrifying, dehumanizing, and uncivilized. The "collateral damage" caused by modern nation states, irrespective of how many lives this consists of, is rationalized as an unfortunate outcome of a greater benevolent act. The suicide bombing, on the other hand, regardless of how few lives are lost in the act, is understood to be carried out *in order* to take innocent lives. Identifying such acts as pre-modern, uncivilized "religious terrorism" places them in (lower) hierarchical relation to the morally matured civilized status of secular politics and modern warfare, which is defined as reasonable, disciplined, and just. (45)

Nearing the end of his work Asad points out that "Liberalism, of course, disapproves of the violent exercises of freedom outside the frame of law." (91) This "frame of law," he reminds us, is not only a product of Western liberal thought, but it too depends on the constant use of coercive violence. By posing the question, "If modern war seeks to found or to defend a free political community with its own law, can one say that suicide terrorism (like a suicidal nuclear strike) belongs in this sense to liberalism?" Asad is challenging the moral and political ideals of how liberals distinguish "good" from "evil." This is what allows him to make the following controversial remark: "It seems that there is no moral difference between the horror inflicted by state armies (especially if those armies belong to powerful states that are unaccountable to international law) and the horror inflicted by insurgents. In the case of powerful states, the cruelty is not random but part of the attempt to discipline unruly populations." (94)

²³⁴ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 57.

Cavanaugh's point is that there are various approaches to defining religion, all of which show the inherent impossibility of finding a responsible, representative definition. Cavanaugh explains that all of these attempts assume that religion exists in the world as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon.²³⁵

He agrees with Talal Asad who argues that what has counted as religion and not-religion has varied widely throughout history and across cultures. These variances, he claims, are due to the fact that particular power relations have more influence on what counts and does not count as religion. Such definitions of religion fail to analytically separate religion from, say, multiple political associations, or they become too narrow in scope and too vague in description. Terms like "transcendence" or "god" make little sense in these definitions.²³⁶ They are made so vague that they no longer have any teeth; they do not tell us much of anything about how these ideas can lead to violence. The functionalist approach is more helpful in the sense that we can observe with more accuracy the way an ideological position leads to certain actions (like violence), but we can no longer distinguish between political ideologies (Marxism, e.g.) and traditional religions (Christianity, e.g.). If they have the same function, then what difference is there?

Cavanaugh's larger point is that we ought to be looking to the power involved in decisions surrounding definitions and categorizations of the religious. If we are concerned with violence, start with what motivates violence; do not start with religion. Instead of searching for what should or should not count as religion, we should focus our attention on how and why certain phenomena come to be labeled "religious" or "secular".²³⁷ Such an investigation can explain more about what forms of power are legitimized by this process and for what potential

²³⁵ Ibid., 58.

²³⁶ Ibid., 59.

²³⁷ Ibid., 120.

reasons. Cavanaugh's suggestion is that the modern liberal nation-state is being legitimized by such arguments. The modern liberal nation-state enacts violence all of the time. It seeks to monopolize violence and therefore it serves its interest to divert attention away from its own violence to a worse, more barbaric, irrational, and indiscriminate violence: *religious* violence.

In the context of Cavanaugh's argument, the more important question becomes: What ends are being served when an act of violence is labeled "religious" instead of "political," "ethnic," or "ideological"? I am convinced that much of the more popular scholarship on religion and violence promotes a threatening gap between "us" and "them" by championing the ideals of the modern West as natural and universal at the expense of various non-Western communities and cultures. In this regard, such genealogical investigations are valuable in that they are able to reveal the constructions within by questioning the natural and universal nature of various categorical distinctions. In doing so, such investigations are also able to disclose configurations of power that function to propel them forward. In a similar manner, I am arguing that a number of secularization theories, even when incapable of representing and/or measuring the broad and complex category of religion, may continue to serve other political and theological motivations that are otherwise divorced from such social-scientific research. Put differently, there is something to gain in the recapitulation of both sides of the secularization debate.

To remind the reader, I have introduced the work of William Cavanaugh for three primary reasons. First, he provides a parallel argument and thus it is helpful to trace the logic of his argument as a way to better understand the position I am taking. Second, Cavanaugh's investigation into the historical and ideological construction of the religious-secular binary is indispensable to my argument. Along with Tomoko Masuzawa and others, Cavanaugh convincingly articulates the ways in which the category of religion is not transcultural or

transhistorical, two assumptions that secularizations theorists rely upon in the construction of their arguments. Third, he argues that the myth of religious violence serves to divert moral scrutiny from other kinds of (secular) violence. While I am *not* arguing that conclusions drawn by secularization theorist function to divert any sort of moral scrutiny, I am arguing that secularization theories function as proxy-debates for other political and theological arguments about the social value of religion. For this reason, I find it helpful to look quickly at the reason Cavanaugh uses the term “myth.” He writes, “I use the term ‘myth’ to describe this claim, not merely to indicate that it is false, but to give a sense of the power of the claim in Western societies. A story takes on the status of myth when it becomes unquestioned. It becomes very difficult to think outside the paradigm that the myth establishes and reflects because myth and reality become mutually reinforcing.”²³⁸ The same, I am arguing, applies to contemporary discourses on secularization. The myth is that religion is a universally identifiable, transcultural, and transhistorical phenomenon that can be measured over time and space. Furthermore, the myth is that religion is a neutral category that describes a naturally occurring and universal aspect of human culture. The power of this myth has led a number of secularization theorists to largely ignore the most fundamental flaw of their studies: the category of religion is a Western construct that is incapable of accounting for a variety of non-traditional, non-Western, and non-Protestant beliefs, practices, and expressions. Commenting on the overall purpose of his work, Cavanaugh writes, “This book has been an attempt to help us in the West see into a significant blind spot that we have created for ourselves.”²³⁹ This dissertation seeks to achieve the same outcome, but with a different set of arguments at the center of its focus.

²³⁸ Ibid., 6.

²³⁹ Ibid., 230.

Constructing the Category of “the Secular”

Up to this point, much of my investigation into the religious-secular dichotomy has focused primarily on the genealogical roots and construction of the religious. However, it would also be helpful to briefly explore the ways in which the category of the secular has been constructed over time. Prior to the Enlightenment in Europe, medieval Europeans did not distinguish the spheres of politics, law, or medicine from a sphere of religion. The terms “religious” and “secular” were part of the European Medieval lexicon, but they both fell under the larger, more encompassing sphere of the Church. The religious referred to priests working within the cloisters, or monastery walls, while “secular” referred to priests working with lay people.²⁴⁰ The point is that our contemporary distinctions are not natural or transhistorical; they are the product of particular (European) historical developments and it thus becomes anachronistic (or outright incoherent) to utilize these categories over expansive periods of time. Eventually, the Protestant Reformation and the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 led to the category of religion becoming increasingly associated with private, individual beliefs.²⁴¹ The secular begins to emerge as the distinct sphere of the sovereign state, which is to be distinguished most prominently from a newly created religious sphere. That is, the secular becomes the public interest of the state, while the religious is reduced to the private affairs (i.e. beliefs) of individuals.

Here, I turn to Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular*, where he traces various evolutions of the secular in order to demonstrate the ways in which the secular is not a neutral,

²⁴⁰ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 179-182.

²⁴¹ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 138.

universally descriptive category.²⁴² He asserts that *secularism* is itself a political doctrine that arose in tandem with the rise of the modern nation state.²⁴³ A major project of the modern nation-state is the effort to unite a variety of people with contrasting identities – be they racial, religious, ethnic, etc. Secularism arises as a new political conception of identity that claims to neutrally transcend all of these differences. In order to properly understand secularism, however, we must first engage the concept of the secular. Asad explains that the secular is a concept born out of biblical scholarship. Christian theologians and historians form the idea of a “secular history” (i.e. the “real” or “scientific” history of events) that is to be distinguished from myth, which is understood as the history of sacred language and symbols.²⁴⁴ Asad writes,

A secular critique developed, accidentally as it were, out of a concern with the apparent unviability of Christian traditional practice and *that in itself* helped to constitute the field of written secular history. The result was a clearer split between “scientific” history (including ecclesiastical history) that depended on an attitude of skeptical inquiry in pursuit of authenticity, and ‘imaginative’ literature (or religion and the arts generally) that depended on setting aside the question of propositional validity. This growing split was what consolidated “secular history” – history as the record of ‘what really happened’ in this world – and in the same moment, it shaped the modern understanding of ‘myth,’ “sacred discourses” and “symbolism.” As textualized memory, secular history has of course become integral to modern life in the nation-state.²⁴⁵

This secular history, we learn, becomes an intrinsic aspect of the modern nation-state. In short, Asad argues that the secular – much like the religious - is not a natural existing phenomenon that was neutrally discovered. Rather, it is a category that is constructed over time within a particular culture that is seeking to achieve particular ends. Asad explains,

I am arguing that “the secular” should not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of “religion” and thus achieves the latter’s relocation. This relies on the assumption that religion is “infecting”

²⁴² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 21.

²⁴³ Note: Asad investigates both the rise of “the secular” and “secularism,” which are to be distinguished from one another.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

the secular domain. [...] The concept of “the secular” today is part of a doctrine called secularism. Secularism doesn’t simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of “free-thinking” citizens. Secularism builds on a particular conception of the world (“natural” and “social”) and of the problems generated by that world.²⁴⁶

In the contemporary political context secularism is not only about confining the religious to a specific sphere or to limited roles, but it is also about recreating the human in a *specific* form. It relies upon notions of the human that are purportedly universal and ideal, and in doing so fails to recognize other valuable forms of human expression and experience. This conception of the secular is assumed and thus reinforced within a variety of secularization theories, including those that will be engaged in the following chapter.

Asad demonstrates this point in part by looking at the ways in which “the Muslim” contributes to these constructions. On the one hand, he explains that Muslim communities are present in the secular nations of Europe and that they stand out against the secularized backdrop of European dress, rituals, practices, and customs. Asad points out that European identity is influenced by the Roman Empire, Christianity, the Enlightenment, and industrialization.²⁴⁷ It has been constructed on a particular, linear history of a relatively homogenous people. Europeans see themselves as a civilized people who are able to appropriately separate their (private) religion from their (public) politics. Muslims are especially offensive because many of them do not make such distinctions. Put differently, *they* are not willing to abandon their dress, their language, their histories. Muslims can be made into Europeans once they replace their histories with European historical and cultural assumptions, as if it is possible for anyone to separate their human qualities from their own histories.²⁴⁸ Also, Muslims are often foreigners, so they are often treated

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 191-192.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 167-168.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 160, 169.

as political outsiders who have come to Europe and are unwilling to play by the rules. Because of this perceived conflict, Muslims remain largely absent from the public political processes. The democratic model is built to represent the majority while allowing for various minority communities with their respective identities to exist underneath the majority.²⁴⁹

Asad concludes that European nations need to be more reflexive in their views on, and implementation of, secularism. As it stands now, European forms of secularism are functioning to protect a specific way of life while merely allowing other identities to exist under its umbrella. Asad calls for a more inclusive and representational political system. Muslims need to be capable of expressing their identities while being part of the social and political European milieu. They ought to be capable of fully flourishing as Muslims and not simply as citizens who happen to be Muslim.²⁵⁰ If Europe fails to allow this, they will always be fearful and “anxious about (Muslim) exiles within its gates and (Muslim) barbarians beyond.”²⁵¹

To summarize, Asad argues that the secular is not a naturally existing concept that was eventually discovered in the modern era. Rather, the secular is a category that was constructed over time as an expression of a particular culture. He explains that secularism today is not only about confining the religious to a specific sphere or to limited roles, but that secularism is about recreating the human in a specific form. He writes, “A secular state is not one characterized by religious indifference, or rational ethics – or political toleration. It is a complex arrangement of legal reasoning, moral practice, and political authority. This arrangement is not the simple outcome of the struggle of secular reason against the despotism of religious authority.”²⁵² It

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 180.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid., 255.

relies on notions of the human that are purportedly universal and ideal, and in doing so fails to recognize other valuable forms of human expression and experience. It is this failure to recognize the varieties of the religious and the secular that many secularization theorists ignore.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd also challenges many of the assumptions entailed in arguments related to secularism and secularization by exploring the multidimensionality of “the secular.”²⁵³ She argues that (a) there are multiple forms of secularism and (b) we are witnessing religious acts of deprivatization that challenge the supposed division between “religion” and “politics.” While her focus is on politics within the realm of international relations, her arguments apply more generally to the supposed distinctions between religion and various secular spheres. For example, her work demonstrates this notion that the religious-secular binary often reinforces ethical, identity-focused constructions to demarcate “us” from “them.”²⁵⁴ While secularism is presented as the natural and universal answer to the problem of religion and politics, many religious groups have asserted their own answers to such issues. Hurd argues that drawing boundaries around what is religious and what is secular *is itself* a political act.²⁵⁵ The problem is that many discourses, including discourses on secularization, depend upon clean, distinct categories from which clear conclusions can be drawn. This becomes especially problematic when no such clean, distinct boundaries demarcating phenomena exist in the forms that

²⁵³ Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism*, 12-13.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 57-58. Western secularism, she argues, has been constructed in opposition to a general concept of religion that was essentialized by a particular description of Islam as that which is anti-modern, anti-Christian, and anti-reason. It is not as if the secularist identity, after constructed, discovered its opposition to Islam; rather, the secularist identity was constructed in opposition to Islam. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd explains that the French, who had been colonizing a number of Islamic territories, openly associated Islam with tyranny, anti-modernism and the uncivilized. To be civilized meant to divest oneself of his religion (i.e. Islam). Without making this separation, a people cannot progress into modernity. Ibid., 46-64.

²⁵⁵ Likewise, with regard to secularization theories, I am arguing that the act of defining “the religious” and “the secular” is itself a political act that goes unchallenged.

sociology demands. This logic, I am arguing is also engrained within theories of secularization. I contend that sociologists and theorists on all sides of the debate have become too comfortable with the categories in assuming that they not only are representative, but that they are neutrally descriptive and naturally occurring. Absent sufficiently representative categories, particularly European, post-Enlightenment constructions of the religious and the secular are favored at the expense of other potential expressions. These particular constructions form the centers of these expansive categories, thus favoring Western traditionalism, institutionalism, and orthodoxy over the individual, idiosyncratic, and modern. A serious engagement with these constructions demonstrates that the categories of the religious and the secular, as well as the distinctions made between them, are *contestable*.

The Power of Defining

Talal Asad argues that it is essential to uncover the genealogical construction of the religious and the secular in order to critically engage with the effects of Western “history making.”²⁵⁶ In other words, one must first identify the systems of power authorized by the category of religion before engaging it. Because the religious and the secular have largely been presented as neutrally descriptive categories, contemporary scholars are less equipped to locate the ideological constructions that remain within. His worry is that when the category of religion is used as a general, universal, neutral category to explain non-Western(ized) beliefs and practices it will have a translating and transformative effect; that is, it will force the practices and

²⁵⁶ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 24.

beliefs of non-Western communities²⁵⁷ into the rigid standards embedded within the construction of the categories themselves. He writes,

To understand better the local peoples “entering” (or “resisting”) modernity, anthropology must surely try to deepen its understanding of the West as something more than a threadbare ideology. To do that will include attempting to grasp its peculiar historicity, the mobile powers that have constructed its structures, projects, and desires. I argue that religion, in its positive and negative senses, is an essential part of that construction.²⁵⁸

So, if Western anthropologists are attempting to understand the behaviors and motivations of Muslims by looking through the lens of religion, they must translate (and thus, transform) the one set of beliefs, practices, and concepts to fit the more familiar, (and more importantly) *particular* (as opposed to universal) Western category of religion.²⁵⁹

At the outset of his book, Asad discusses the anthropological construction of the category of religion. He explains that his explorations are motivated “by the conviction that its conceptual geology has profound implications for the ways in which non-Western traditions are now able to grow and change.”²⁶⁰ Much like Tomoko Masuzawa and J. Z. Smith, he fears that there is an unfounded consensus among anthropologists and historians that religion is both transhistorical and transcultural. That is, it is assumed that religion is a phenomenon that has always existed throughout history and exists across all cultures, though it manifests itself differently due to variations in cultural expressions, languages, etc. While he rejects this claim, his larger point is

²⁵⁷ It is important to note that many traditions that exist in “the West” remain in many ways “non-Western.” Consider, for example, many of the indigenous traditions of the North America, local folk religions, or the idiosyncratic religious identities of individuals. Moreover, it is also possible for religious traditions outside of the West to fit quite naturally into Western normative religious categories. What separates Western and non-Western is more of an ideological distinction than a geographical one.

²⁵⁸ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 24.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

that not only are these universal definitions problematic, but the very act of defining is itself a product of specific cultural and historical practices that are driven by underlying sources of power. He writes, “My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”²⁶¹ In other words, Asad is arguing that it is not only the content of universal definitions of religion that are problematic; we also need to look at who is doing the defining and for what purposes. In the next chapter, I argue that this is a problem in modern secularization theories. Definitions of religion, which have profound effects on how data is collected and interpreted, are treated as natural, universal, and neutrally descriptive.²⁶² Furthermore, I argue that they are treated in too casual of a manner and are thus under-representative.

Asad proceeds to explore the ways in which the category of religion has undergone many significant shifts in the past few centuries. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, for example, the line separating the religious from the secular was anything but distinct and fixed. He explains,

Several times before the Reformation, the boundary between the religious and the secular was redrawn, but always the formal authority of the Church remained preeminent. In later centuries, with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the moods and motivations of the individual believer.²⁶³

The post-Reformation era would define religion in more Protestant terms, focusing on belief and individual faith over the criteria of discipline and ritual that preceded it. This emphasis on belief

²⁶¹ Ibid., 29.

²⁶² It is not only the secularization theorists that overlook the importance of definitional processes; the larger studies that collect much of the data that secularization theorists often rely upon (Pew Forum, e.g.) also treat such definitions as natural, neutral, and universal. When measuring levels of religiosity, such studies favor a Western set of criteria.

²⁶³ Ibid., 39.

became the contradistinction to the emerging natural sciences. Therefore, one's religious identity could be conceived of as a set of propositions about the natural world.²⁶⁴ As such propositions (which were often tied to scripture) came under greater scrutiny in the post-Enlightenment world, the foundation of religious beliefs began to shift. In other words, the post-Reformation category of religion was more about how one interprets the natural world and less about ritual and discipline tied to scripture. As the power and influence of scripture's ability to interpret the natural world began to wane, nature took its place. Or, as Asad puts it, "'Nature' became the real space of divine writing, and eventually the indisputable authority for the truth of all sacred texts written in merely human language."²⁶⁵ This eventually leads to the construction of religion as a universal category; if the natural world itself is understood to be divine writing, then nature becomes the source of universal truth. "Natural religion" is universal, transhistorical, and transcultural. It is the genus of which there are many species, or "religions" of the world.

The point is that the universal definitions of religion that were popping up in Western Europe were specifically Christian in nature; that is, these definitions prove to be particular Christian responses to theological problems or queries. These definitions are formed within a particular history and out of particular forms of power, yet they are presented as universal, transcultural, and transhistorical. The problem with this, again, is in its damaging effect when applied to (primarily) non-Western communities. Such communities and religious expressions are assumed to be (or constructed as being) less mature or less developed ("primitive") than their Western counterparts. Thus, the value of uncovering the genealogical construction of these

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

categories and concepts is that we can begin to understand that such descriptions actually say less about the communities themselves and more about the state of Western anthropology.

In addition to the genealogical approach, which is the focus of this section, Asad also engages other disciplinary approaches in order to explore other ways in which anthropology's conceptual geology affects non-Western traditions. For example, he discusses at length the notion of "translation" and argues that there is an "inequality of languages" in the global social context.²⁶⁶ When trying to understand another culture, anthropologists frequently attempt to translate the beliefs, practices, and expressions of other cultures (their "language," so to speak), in order to make the strange more familiar. One of the problems with this is that the process is most often one-directional; that is, there is a translation of the other (non-Western) cultural specificities (or language, in the broader sense of the word) into the Western conceptual framework.²⁶⁷

Because many of these cultures are often oral traditions, anthropologists often inscribe meaning into cultural practices in order to formulate and offer interpretations. His point is not simply that this process leads to eventual misunderstanding or misrepresentation (which it does). Rather, his point is that there are certain forms of power that are involved in these translation efforts and that contemporary scholars of religion ought to be more concerned with the power involved in these interactions as well as the forms of power that continue to be authorized. Asad explains that this will lead to a level of discomfort, but that such discomfort must be preserved in any translation process. One should not strive to make sense of every aspect of another culture because there are some things that may not be appropriately translated.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 189.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 173.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 199.

His hope is that anthropologists become aware of the assumptions engrained in their own work. Attempting to understand other cultures and their histories means anthropologists have to let go of the idea that modern cultures are morally superior to non-modern cultures. When looking at Saudi Arabia (Asad's country of birth), for example, he tells us that "their culture" is often described in terms of its religious identity and this is contrasted with the secular, modern identity of the West.²⁶⁹ In short, the culture of Saudi Arabia is first translated into the particularly Western religious-secular dichotomy. *Their religion* profoundly inhibits the culture's ability to develop into a modern civilization. Religion becomes the criterion by which we strive to understand Saudi culture. Asad's point is that if anthropologists were more aware of the ways in which they are constructing the culture to fit Western preconceptions, then they might see the conditions of these "descriptions" – that there is a great disparity in power between the Western anthropologist (who is said to be describing and contributing to a universal history of humanity) and the religious other (who is described as not yet fully capable of grasping the work of the anthropologist). This disparity in power, Asad emphasizes, is the more pressing issue at hand.

Let us return, then, to the work of Clifford Geertz. As I stated in the previous chapter, Asad engages Geertz's anthropological contributions to the study of religion as a way of revealing a concerning trend in the Western social-scientific study of religion. While Geertz is deservedly praised for advancing the field of anthropology in many ways, Asad is critical of the ways in which his definition of religion continues to inscribe various (Western) theological assumptions into the category itself.²⁷⁰ He points to the fact that Geertz's definition focuses on the criterion of "meaning." Asad writes, "The demand that the received practices must *affirm*

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 233.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 43.

something about the fundamental nature of reality, that it should therefore always be possible to state meanings for them which are not plain nonsense, is the first condition of determining whether they belong to ‘religion.’”²⁷¹ Asad is saying that this is a subtle, but powerful affirmation of a post-Reformation European construction of religion. In other words, it assumes that for something – a ritual, an utterance, a practice - to be considered religious, it must be pointing to an (earlier) intellectualist attempt at engaging the natural world.²⁷²

“Belief” becomes the essence of the religious. That is, Geertz reduces the religious to that which reflects the historical conditions that gave rise to Protestantism. As Protestant Europeans living in a post-Enlightenment world begin to find confidence in their construction of the religious, they infuse such assumptions (often unwittingly) into their views of “the other.”²⁷³ To better understand the other, one must better understand their beliefs. “This emphasis on belief meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science.”²⁷⁴ This is why Geertz’s definition of religion is well-received at the time; in many respects, it focuses on the meaning of actions, utterances, and rituals by attempting to understand the underlying beliefs that act as their foundations. Belief is not a distinctive characteristic of all religions, yet it is assumed to be. He goes on to say that...

it is not too unreasonable to maintain that ‘the basic axiom’ underlying what Geertz calls “the religious perspective” is *not* everywhere the same. It is preeminently the Christian

²⁷¹ Ibid., 43.

²⁷² Asad is referring to the last three parts of Geertz’s definition of religion, stated as the following: “(3) by *formulating conceptions of a general order of existence* and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of *factuality* that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely *realistic* [italics mine].” Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid., 43-44.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion.²⁷⁵

This is what Asad calls the “modern cognitivist notion of religion” – the idea that the supposed universality of religion is held together by the existence of beliefs about the natural world. They may differ in content, but in all cases, belief forms its foundation.

He then argues that such intellectualist or cognitivist notions of religion are often conflated with communicative ones; that is, a community’s rituals, utterances, or practices may not be best interpreted as expressions of underlying beliefs about the natural world and the meaning attached to such beliefs. The individual may not even “know” the meaning of the practice, in the sense that the anthropologist demands. “It is a modern idea,” Asad explains, “that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge.”²⁷⁶ This brings me to discourses on secularization. At best, social surveys measure the existence of a particular *kind* of religiosity, that which fits rather easily into the post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation cognitive intellectualist construction of the category of religion. This would, of course, fail to capture the various forms of religiosity that do not fit so easily into this category. However, to conclude here would be missing the value of Asad’s criticisms. Not only is the category of religion limiting, it also serves to ignore and thus authorize underlying constructs of power that have produced such definitions. Remember, he writes “that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”²⁷⁷ Offering a definition of religion is itself an exercise of power. Symbols do not simply contain meaning; rather, symbols are sets of relationships between objects and events. To understand the meaning of something, then, is *not* to understand the essence of something that naturally exists; it is to understand how

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 48.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 36.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 29.

such relationships have been established. In other words, to understand the meaning of a symbol is to understand power. While Geertz assumes that a natural division between the religious and the secular exists, Asad argues that such a division is the product of historical events (i.e. the exertion of power). This is one of the reasons I am critical of secularization theories; many of them treat the categories of the religious and the secular as natural and neutral, thereby ignoring the power (of Western ideological dominance) used to construct and reify such categories. This has the unsettling effect of erasing non-conforming identities and expressions by translating – and thus transforming – “the other” into the Western imaginary through a process of definition (theory) and representation (social-scientific surveys).

CHAPTER 4:

THE SECULARIZATION DEBATE

Steve Bruce, Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, defends what he calls the secularization paradigm.²⁷⁸ According to Bruce, in its most basic form, secularization is the process whereby religious beliefs, practices, and institutions lose their authority and influence in the modern world.²⁷⁹ As societies rely more heavily on scientific and technological discoveries - the process of modernization - the need for religion declines, or so goes the argument. While Bruce is by no means the only defender of this argument (e.g. I will begin with the earlier contributions of sociologist Peter Berger²⁸⁰), he has become one of its most prominent advocates, publishing dozens of articles and multiple books on the topic. Among Bruce's critics are Rodney Stark, Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington and Roger Finke, Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University.²⁸¹ In short, they argue that the secularization thesis is false. Their research, they argue, demonstrates that religion is *not* in decline and there is no consistent relationship - positive or negative - between modernity and religiosity. Rather, they argue that religion is a fundamental aspect of society and is thus not subject to the decline that Bruce's theory claims to demonstrate.

²⁷⁸ Sometimes referred to as the "secularization thesis." Steve Bruce, *God is Dead*; Steve Bruce, *Secularization*.

²⁷⁹ I am referring to a specific form of the secularization thesis, or "secularization paradigm," that asserts religious *decline*. Other forms of the secularization reject the conclusion of decline and instead argue that secularization is a process of *differentiation*, for example. I will explore many of these theories of secularization later in this chapter, but I will engage the "secularization as decline" thesis most directly, as it is the focus of a prominent series of sociological and philosophical investigations that will be the focus of this dissertation.

²⁸⁰ Though Peter Berger later recants much of what he writes in his groundbreaking book, *The Sacred Canopy*, it remains important for this dissertation because it launches the modern discourse on secularization.

²⁸¹ I also frequently refer to the work of William Bainbridge, who collaborated with Rodney Stark on their 1985 book, *The Future of Religion*.

How, one might ask, can two groups of sociologists come to such contradictory conclusions? Are they even looking at the same data? At times, yes. At other times, no. The longer, more complex, answer to this question will be the focus of this chapter. Put briefly, in the following pages I argue that prominent contributors to discourses on secularization are engaging in notably *different* projects with notably different values placed on the religious. In other words, while each claims to be studying religion or religiosity, there is little consistency in the ways in which religion is assumed to function in the world. To be clear, though, this is not a matter of mere semantics; it is not as if definitional agreement will solve the problem I am outlining. Rather, as I argued in the previous chapters, the category of religion is culturally, historically, and ideologically constructed. That is, definitions that inform the category are, by nature, excluding. Any one definition of religion is incapable of representing the variety and range of religiosity expressed by those surveyed. I have argued that there is no transcultural or transhistorical essence of religion; however, the category of religion continues to be treated as if there is an essential essence (or that religion contains basic shared criteria) in a number of sociological theories of secularization. I agree strongly with sociologist Meredith McGuire, when she writes, “Realizing the complexities of individuals’ religious practices, experiences, and expressions [...] has made me extremely doubtful that even mountains of quantitative sociological data (especially data from surveys and other relatively superficial modes of inquiry) can tell us much of any value about individuals’ religions.”²⁸² I am arguing that the attempt to measure and study a supposed phenomenon called “religion” is foiled from the very start because the historical construction of the category relies upon *particular* definitions that by their very nature cannot be representative of the broad category of religion.

²⁸² McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 5.

As stated in the opening chapter, it is my contention that dominant discourses on secularization continue to treat the categories of the religious and the secular as neutral and universal categories that are informed by an unchallenged and specific sets of criteria, thus compromising their sociological conclusions. Presenting these categories in such a fashion empowers the sociologist to hide behind claims of neutrality and objectivity. If the religious and the secular are presented as neutral descriptors of natural, universal phenomena, then the sociologist is said to be engaging in *observation* rather than argumentation; however, the categories of the religious and the secular are not neutral descriptors of natural, universal phenomena. This section, therefore, will focus on the introduction and evolution of the secularization debate in the 20th and 21st centuries in order to explore the ways in which the categories of the religious and the secular have been improperly treated and utilized to draw largely unwarranted conclusions.²⁸³ It is not my intention to debunk the secularization thesis in order to argue that levels of religiosity have either sustained or increased over a particular period of time. Rather, I will be arguing that in light of our current understanding of the genealogical and historical constructions of the very categories used to measure religiosity, the larger secularization debate itself should be called into question or held to more rigorous standards.

²⁸³ I will say much more about this, but one way of framing this statement is to argue that conclusions drawn by Steve Bruce or Roger Finke are not wholly unreasonable or even poorly argued; rather, the problem is that their conclusions seek to represent more than they are capable of. In other words, the category of religion utilized by each theorist is less representative than their conclusions claim. In fact, I find Bruce's secularization theory very convincing for a narrowly defined form of religion. If, for example, Bruce were willing to admit to the restrictive nature and narrow scope of his thesis, his argument would become much stronger. We will see, though, that he is unwilling to give such definitional disputes, which comprise the very foundation of his argument, sufficient consideration.

Secularization: Peter Berger

As I began writing this section, it became very clear that a comprehensive exploration of the various perspectives in the secularization debate would become unreasonably long and, more importantly, unnecessary. For this reason, I have decided to focus my attention on some of the most prominent and respected voices in this discussion. By focusing on the contributions of a) Peter Berger, b) Steve Bruce, and c) Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and William Bainbridge, I have plenty of material to demonstrate the above remarks. In addition to these prominent theorists, I will occasionally draw upon the works of Thomas Luckmann, Grace Davie, José Casanova, and others. Much of their critical analyses have helped to further develop the secularization debate; ignoring their contributions would be both unfair and misleading. With that said, I have limited these discussions to allow for a deeper engagement with Berger, Bruce, and Stark et. al.

In order to frame the contemporary secularization debate, it makes sense to start with an overview of one of the earliest focused sociological contributions to our topic. Peter Berger is an Austrian-American sociologist whose 1967 book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, essentially introduces the 20th century social scientific debate on secularization.²⁸⁴ While Berger later recants much of what he argues in *The Sacred Canopy*, it nonetheless shapes the dominant discourse on secularization that continues to this day.²⁸⁵ Steve Bruce, for example, comes to many of the same conclusions as Berger, but he does so with

²⁸⁴ It is worth noting that Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (Pelican: Harmondsworth, 1996) is also firmly situated in the field of secularization; however, Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* created a much more robust set of responses that worked to frame the secularization debate for the following forty to fifty years. It is also worth noting that the aim *The Sacred Canopy* is broader than secularization itself; Berger seeks to understand the role of religion in the modern world through a sociological lens. Some of his conclusions lead to a number of responses, which can be understood as the beginning of the secularization debate.

²⁸⁵ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 1969.

mountains of quantitative data to support his claims. On the other side of the debate, Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, and Roger Finke disagree with the conclusions drawn in *The Sacred Canopy*, but they agree with Berger's market-economy approach. In short, we will see that the dominant voices in secularization theory are in large part influenced by Peter Berger.²⁸⁶

Berger argues that humans are, by their very nature, social animals who create their world around them. In so doing, the world appears objective and separate from us. Because the world appears to be objective, it has the unique ability to further socialize the humans who inhabit this world. In other words, "Society is a dialectical phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer."²⁸⁷ Society is created by humans, and yet humans are created by their society. This process of socialization is the process whereby new generations are taught to live with the ideas and norms that the previous generation established or helped to sustain or perpetuate.²⁸⁸ This dialectical process is thus generational and, while subject to change, continues to carry an aura of objectivity. Berger explains this is a three-stage process that he calls "externalization, objectivation, and internalization."²⁸⁹ Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of the human into the world. This is what he means when he says that humans create the world around them. As the world is created,

²⁸⁶ Bryan Wilson (*Religion in Secular Society*) and Thomas Luckmann in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Allen Lane, 1966); Luckmann, *Invisible Religion* are two other early voices in this conversation who greatly influence the direction of debate surrounding secularization. While I engage some of Luckmann's contributions later in this chapter, I have decided to leave Wilson's work out of this discussion. Much of Steve Bruce's later works parallel the structure and content of Wilson's argument, but with more care and attention. (For more on Wilson's influence on Bruce, see Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On*, ed. Steve Bruce (New York, 2017.) For this reason, I chose to focus on Berger's work, as it arguably has wider and more significant influence.

²⁸⁷ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 3.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 4.

it undergoes the process of objectivation, which is the process whereby the created world (both mental and physical realities) is seen as both separate from humans and objectively real. Lastly, the process of internalization entails the reappropriation of this “objective” world into “structures of the subjective consciousness.”²⁹⁰ Berger sums up this process when he writes, “It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality sui generis. It is through internalization that man is a product of society.”²⁹¹ Berger’s theory clearly applies to various cultural and societal norms that may have no relationship to religion. Think, for example, of cultural views on gender, or marriage, or murder, or manners. Socialization occurs in many forms with regard to various aspects of human life; religion, according to Berger, is one of these aspects that undergoes this very process, and it is the subject of his sociological theory.

Religious ideas create a certain type of society by outpouring such ideas into the world. He claims that “Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established.”²⁹² And by “sacred,” he means that which contains a quality of mystery and “awesome power” that is both transcendent and immanent.²⁹³ His theory of the sacred is much in line with Mircea Eliade’s contributions on the subject.²⁹⁴ This sacred world, because of the universal claims of

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid., 25.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Translated by Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987). Mircea Eliade’s work is mostly concerned with two fundamentally opposed human experiences – the sacred and the profane. The sacred, he tells us, is that which is completely apart from our normal experiences; it stands out from all that is “natural” or “normal.” This is essentially how Berger treats the sacred, which he demonstrates when he writes, “The sacred is apprehended as ‘sticking out’ from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life.” (26) The sacred accounts for a wide range of religious expressions and manifestations. A rock or a tree

religion, extends to the entire cosmos; religious claims become objective, or taken as fact and thus the world appears to be completely separate from human beings. Berger claims that religion has “the unique capacity” to locate human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference. In other words, the process of legitimizing religious claims is to relate humanly defined reality to ultimate, universal, and cosmic reality.²⁹⁵ Religious claims are thus treated as sui generis by those who are compelled by them. This shapes the way future generations continue to see the world and it reinforces these ideas, thus further establishing a sense of objectivity or factuality to their status. This is the legitimation that religion relies upon. The whole universe is seen as “humanly significant.”²⁹⁶ “Above all,” Berger explains, “society manifests itself by its coercive power. The final test of its objective reality is its capacity to impose itself upon the reluctance of individuals. Society directs, sanctions, controls, and punishes individual conduct.”²⁹⁷ Religion, he argues, clearly demonstrates this status of a set of objective realities, and is thus not only a social construction, but a coercive one.

can be considered sacred, as is the incarnation of Christ. Eliade tells us that in both we witness the sacred because they are understood to be wholly different from the natural world. Now, someone might say that a tree and a rock is part of the natural world, and Eliade would agree. His point is not that all rocks and trees are to be considered sacred (this would render the category meaningless as it would be completely conflated with the profane); rather, his point is that as some rocks and trees are worshipped and revered by some communities, the sacred has become manifested into these objects, thus making them no longer ordinary and profane objects. Because the sacred is determined by the social community, the sacred will be differently manifested in different communities and at different times. That is, there is no identifiable essence of the sacred other than that it is always that which is not the profane. In other words, while the sacred is manifested differently in each society, it will always be completely set apart from the profane – the ordinary, natural, and normal experiences, events, ideas, or things.

²⁹⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 35-36. Social claims on marriage, or gender, or manners, for example, do not, by necessity, seek alignment with a cosmic reality. Their claims do not extend to the ultimate or universal in the same way religious claims do. He later argues that to deny religious legitimation is to fall into meaninglessness, evil, and madness. (39)

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 28.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

Berger then goes on to define “profane” as simply the “absence of sacred status.”²⁹⁸ Again, we find him in much agreement with Eliade in defining the profane.²⁹⁹ Secularization, according to Berger, is the process by which the sacred is replaced, over time, by the profane and Berger is convinced that the modern world is undergoing the process of secularization.³⁰⁰ “By secularization,” he later writes, “we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”³⁰¹ In other words, the sacred world begins to lose its coercive power over individuals and societies. He further explains, “It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁹⁹ One way in which the sacred and the profane continues to be manifested today is in the concept of time. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 68-95. Sacred time is that which interrupts the continuous, monotonous profane time that is our watches, calendars, and work schedules. In other words, Eliade tells us that religious festivals have historically been manifestations of the sacred in time. (89-91) As the sacred is completely set apart from the profane, sacred time (in the form of religious festivals) is completely set apart from profane time. Often religious festivals, Eliade tells us, are the recreation of a religious event – an event that was sanctioned by the gods and was originally performed by the gods. (Ibid.) In recreating such events, time is altered in a way that allows men to live in the original moment; those taking part in the festival are not trotting along in profane time; rather, they are taking part in another time, one not measured by clocks or calendars but by the actions and creations of gods. This is sacred time. When it ceased to be this and functions on the calendar form of profane time, it no longer is a sacred event. It has been desacralized (made profane). Think, for example, of those “religious holidays” that are no longer recreations of some primary religious event with the gods, and are experienced as we experience profane time. Another example that Eliade provides to demonstrate the vast difference between the sacred and the profane is in the act of eating. He says that profane eating is eating for nourishment. (14) We eat because our bodies require the calories to function. For the religious person, eating is a sacred and communal act. Food is not just a natural form of nourishment found in our environment; food is a gift from the gods so that we can take part in the recreation of life ourselves.

³⁰⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 26, 127. “Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies.” (124)

³⁰¹ Ibid., 106.

the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world.”³⁰²

Individuals begin to interpret the world without turning to religious interpretations. Earlier in his book he explains that individuals have various experiences that, at certain points in history, seemed inexplicable. Think, for example, of the comparable realities of dreaming and consciousness, or the seemingly indiscriminate nature of infectious diseases. Religion, Berger argues, served to integrate the inexplicable realities of everyday life with larger (supposed) sacred and cosmic realities; prophecies and divine interventions supplied sufficient meaning and reason to such events. He then writes,

“Within a modern (“scientific”) frame of reference, of course, religion is less capable of performing this integration. [...] All the same, where religion continues to be meaningful as an interpretation of existence, its definitions of reality must somehow be able to account for the fact that there are different spheres of reality in the ongoing experience of everyone.”³⁰³

In short, secularization, as Berger defines it, appears to be occurring. What, then, are the causes of secularization?

Before addressing this question, we must understand that Berger believes that much of what drives religious ideas is the unavoidable fear and mystery surrounding death. He writes, “Death presents society with a formidable problem not only because of its obvious threat to the continuity of human relationships, but because it threatens the basic assumptions of order on which society rests.”³⁰⁴ It is for this reason that he also sometimes defines the profane as “chaos.” The sacred seeks to provide order to one’s ideas while the profane is a lack of order and regularity. He writes,

This chaos must be kept at bay at all cost. To ensure this, every society develops procedures that assist its members to remain “reality-oriented” [...] For the moment,

³⁰² Ibid., 107.

³⁰³ Ibid., 43.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 23.

suffice it to say that the individual is provided by society with various methods to stave off the nightmare world of anomy and to stay within the safe boundaries of the established nomos.³⁰⁵

He is clear to say that religious ideas are not the only responses one can have to the mystery of death; while the fear and mystery of death appears to be a permanent aspect of society, societies and individuals can produce other non-religious responses. He explains,

Every human society, however legitimated, must maintain its solidarity in the face of chaos. Religiously legitimated solidarity brings this fundamental sociological fact into sharper focus. [...] Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it.³⁰⁶

As an individual is socialized, she learns how to “correctly” suffer and learn to accept the inevitability of death. As a consequence of becoming socialized, “the pain becomes more tolerable, the terror less overwhelming, as the sheltering canopy of the nomos extends to cover even those experiences that may reduce the individual to howling animality.”³⁰⁷

Berger calls this phenomenon a social theodicy. In other words, while God or religious ideas need not provide the answers to such suffering and fear (as a conventional theodicy may do), a primary function of society is to provide a *social* theodicy as a way of providing meaning and order in a world that can easily be interpreted as chaotic. Berger believes that such theodicies can be located in various forms of “primitive religions,” Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, as well as any number of contemporary (and historical) Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologies. Furthermore, there are also emerging secular social theodicies as well.³⁰⁸ He then explains that

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 24. “Nomos” is Berger’s term for the socialized knowledge created and accepted by a society.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 51.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 55.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 60, 65-68, 74-79.

Western religious traditions (and particularly Protestantism) may have carried the seeds of secularization within itself.³⁰⁹ Catholicism, he argues, has long seen the world as enchanted, endowed with spirits and preserving the supernatural belief in miracles.³¹⁰ According to Berger, this is an indisputable representation of a sacred, religious worldview. Protestantism, however, begins to plant the seeds of secularization. It abolishes the sacraments, abandons the belief in saints and spirits, and it no longer searches for miracles in the modern world. Instead, the sacred is “narrowed” and is no longer found throughout our universe and in our daily lives. The sacred is now restricted the grace of God. He sees this as a major shift that opens the way to secularization. Now all secularization needs to open its floodgates is to cut this “narrow channel,” by which he means the concept of God’s grace.³¹¹ Berger explains,

In other words, with nothing remaining “in between” a radically transcendent God and a radically immanent human world *except* this one channel, the sinking of the latter into implausibility left an empirical reality in which, indeed, “God is dead.” This reality then became amenable to the systematic, rational, penetration, both in thought and activity, which we associate with modern science and technology. A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut.³¹²

Eventually, this leads to “crisis of credibility in religion,” according to Berger.³¹³ It is not simply that more individuals tend to be increasingly uncertain on religious matters; this is what Berger calls “subjective secularization.” The crisis of credibility in religion refers to “objective secularization,” which Berger defines as the introduction of pluralism. Again, it is not simply that religious ideas and positions seem to be waning. Rather, we are increasingly “confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies,” such as scientific and

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 113.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 112.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid., 112-113.

³¹³ Ibid., 127.

economic positions, that exert coercive power and begin to contribute to the process of socialization.³¹⁴ He goes on to explain that modernization, which is the process of the economic capitalist industrial age, further contributes to the proliferation of other reality-defining agencies and that such a trend is irreversible.³¹⁵ The competition that grows out of this process breaks up the monopolizing socializing power of one religious group. Berger argues that religious realities, when competing with other reality-defining agencies, naturally take on the logic of market economics.³¹⁶ Religious groups now have a product to market to potential (and no longer assumed) consumers.

The plausibility of religious facts is weakened, according to Berger, as a result of its competition with other reality-defining agencies.³¹⁷ The theological claims that are used within this emerging market-economy, in other words, begin to lose their power and influence. “That is, the plausibility of religious definitions of reality is put in question in the minds of ordinary people with no knowledge of or even interest in theology.”³¹⁸ He then concludes that the modern era will continue to see a decline in religion. First, we will see a slight favoring of liberal Christian theologies because they create less friction with emerging scientific realities. It is only a matter of time, especially considering that “modernization is today a worldwide phenomenon,” that we will see “all religions” adapting to the effects of modernization.³¹⁹

Now that we have a sense of Berger’s sociological theory of religion as well as his conclusions, let us briefly examine the ways in which his approach recapitulates many of the

³¹⁴ Ibid., 127.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 132.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 138.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 156.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 171.

assumptions introduced in the previous chapter. Most notably he relies upon a narrow, under representative Western construction of the category of religion while assuming that religion is a transhistorical, transcultural, and universal phenomenon.³²⁰ In other words, his theory of secularization is based almost entirely on Western assumptions about religion and is limited to the contemporary societies of Europe and the United States.³²¹ While he examines a number of cases and examples within the Western world, he assumes that religion everywhere will be similarly affected, albeit at different paces with slight variations. He believes that religion everywhere will be affected similarly because “Westernization” and “modernization” are slowly becoming global phenomena. While he spends much of his time looking at the content of religions in the West (e.g. his comparison of Catholicism and Protestantism, which is at the heart of his social theory), he largely dismisses the content of religion(s) in the non-Western world. This is especially troublesome because he notes in the first appendix, “Sociological Definitions of Religion,” that he relies upon a substantive definition of religion. If religion is best defined by its content (for Berger, this substance is “the sacred”), then his theory ought to adapt to the variant expressions of this content. What I mean by this is that while it is plausible that traditional forms of Catholicism and Protestantism may react in particular ways to modernization and pluralism because they have contributed to the creation of modernization and pluralism, the same cannot necessarily be extended to non-Western traditions. In other words, he locates a major source of secularization in a more nuanced comparison between Catholic and Protestant worldviews and responses to modernity. If the seeds of secularization are built into the Christian theologies now facing a modern, increasingly scientific world, then such theories of

³²⁰ I will focus more on these tendencies when engaging Steve Bruce’s contributions in the following pages.

³²¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 108.

secularization are sure to focus on the ways in which primarily Western religious constructs, ideas, institutions, symbols, etc. continue to exist or not. If the dialectical process of secularization is one that oscillates between modern Western industrialism and (primarily) Christian religious ideas, to what extent is it capable of accounting for non-Western practices, institutions, rituals, and modes of thinking? He does not clearly define the criteria one would measure, but rather relies upon generalities (“religious symbols,” “institutions,” etc.) and fails to consider the range of religious identities across cultures and time. I will say more about this tendency in the following pages that focus on Steve Bruce’s contributions.

Secularization: Steve Bruce

Steve Bruce interprets a history of sociological survey data to reinforce the basic structure outlined in Berger’s social theory of religion in order to amend, but ultimately reinforce many of the conclusions drawn in *The Sacred Canopy*. Stark, Finke, and Bainbridge’s economic model, which will be the focus of the following section, seeks to challenge some of the conclusions Bruce makes about secularization, modernization, and pluralism. Both, however, are direct responses to the early contributions of Peter Berger.

Steve Bruce has written extensively on secularization. His general theory and conclusions have remained rather consistent over the years, but his most recent book, *Secularization*, is the most refined and comprehensive version of his argument.³²² In this book, he defends the claim

³²² Ibid., vi. Bruce explains himself that *Secularization*, is his most thorough, updated, and articulate work on the subject when he writes, “Since the 1990s there has been a welcome growth in large-scale empirical studies of religion in the modern world: we are now better able to judge the secularization story. Secondly, critics have advanced new reasons for rejecting the paradigm, and these need to be addressed. The final reason is that, after decades of pottering around in the subject, I think I finally understand what I wanted to say all along and can now say it fairly clearly.” Ibid.

that religious beliefs and institutions have steadily lost their authority and influence in the modern world. Before moving forward, allow me to state my criticism of Bruce's theory of secularization as clearly and concisely as possible. If secularization is the process of religious decline over time, one must be able to adequately and consistently define and measure the very subject that is at the foundation of the theory: religion. In other words, if Bruce is going to argue that religion is steadily losing its authority and influence over time, then he must, at the very outset, explicitly define religion and demonstrate the ways in which he will measure "it." In the following pages, I plan to show the ways in which Bruce fails to do this. Let me restate that. Bruce does a fine job demonstrating the ways in which a particular and narrow construction of religion is steadily losing its influence over time. The problem is that he then generalizes this to religion as such.³²³ Foregoing the necessary work of providing a clearly defined, widely representative definition of religion, Bruce instead offers a substantive definition of religion that outlines a set of institutionalized, Western, Protestant, post-Enlightenment criteria that is incapable of capturing a wide variety of religious expressions. In turn, Bruce's theory of secularization does a very good job at measuring the decline of a very specific form of religious expression that is focused on the belief in supernatural agents, church attendance and membership, and the frequency of prayer. Furthermore, I argue that Bruce's *decision* to define religion in this way functions to a) cast religion in a mould that is blind to the possibilities of religious expression in the modern world and b) problematically endorse a religious-secular dichotomy that ignores its genealogical construction. In other words, at best Bruce's conclusions are a gross overgeneralization and at worst they are obfuscating dimensions of power involved in privileging the particular use of the categories while presenting them as universal, neutral, and

³²³Bruce, *Secularization*, 120.

benign.³²⁴ The effects of the latter will be discussed in the final chapter. For now, let us return to Bruce's theory of secularization.

As was just stated, it is important to first define one's terms. In his defense, Bruce *does* define religion on the opening page of his book. He defines religion as "Beliefs, actions, and institutions based on the existence of supernatural entities with powers of agency (that is, Gods) or impersonal processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu and Buddhist notion of karma, for example) that set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs."³²⁵ The problem is that he, like Peter Berger, relies upon a substantive definition of religion that focuses on institutions, practices, and beliefs that involve intervening supernatural entities. There is nothing inherently wrong with offering a narrow, Western definition of religion. I am not here to argue that any one definition is inherently better than another. However, especially when one's research seeks to measure the existence of a given phenomenon, it seems all the more important to consider the implications of defining. If, after all, I choose to define religion as that which gives one ultimate purpose in life, I would need to establish very different criteria for locating it. Bruce tends to reject such functional, or expansive, definitions because, to him, they no longer have any teeth; they are incapable of establishing firm boundaries between the religious and the secular.

In other words, expansive definitions make it difficult to discern the targeted phenomenon from other, related phenomena. For example, expanding the definition of religion to include too much leads to the inability to differentiate the religious from things like communism, nationalism, or one's love for football.³²⁶ His contention is that many who

³²⁴ Put briefly, I will argue that this obfuscation serves to conceal a variety of political arguments about the social value of religion, whether Bruce knows it or not.

³²⁵ Ibid., 1.

³²⁶ Ibid., 111.

challenge the secularization paradigm are inappropriately inflating the category of religion to include a number of otherwise non-religious beliefs and practices. Instead, he sticks to “traditional” forms of religiosity. The problem with this is that there is no effective, agreed upon method for drawing that line. To draw the line is an exertion of one’s power.

The problem is that a similar criticism can be said about substantive definitions of religion (which Bruce and Berger prefer). That is, substantive definitions are often very narrowly constructed. In short, they define religion by their substance. To be considered a religion, a phenomenon must contain “x” and “y” criteria, for example. A well-known example of this can be found in Melford Spiro’s “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation”, where he defines religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”³²⁷ The obvious problem is that such a definition elicits immediate protest by those who consider themselves (or their beliefs, practices, rituals, etc.) to be religious without a) subscribing to an institution or b) believing in superhuman beings. Think, for example, of the solitary Zen Buddhist monk who spends her life detached from the material world in an effort to find peace. Or the spiritual new age man who communes with the power of the universe while gardening. Or the Christian whose religious identity is informed by his social bonds and the moral teaching of Christ rather than the literalness of the resurrection or a belief in the rapture. One could stand firm and continue to claim that these instances are not religious, of course. But in doing so, one is dismissing the complexity of religious identity that goes well beyond institutionalized religion, belief in superhuman figures, or patterned rituals. Such definitions are easier to measure, of course, but that is hardly a good reason to settle debate.

³²⁷ Melford Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Travistock Publications Ltd, 1966), 85-94.

Given Bruce's rather narrow, substantive definition of religion, he relies most heavily on the criteria of church attendance,³²⁸ belief or faith in God,³²⁹ prayer or worship,³³⁰ church membership,³³¹ and orthodox or supernatural beliefs, such as having a literal view of scripture, a belief in heaven and hell, miracles, etc.³³², and participation in religiously sanctioned activities, such as weddings, funerals, and baptisms.³³³ The problem, again, is not necessarily that *his* definition or criteria are inherently wrong, but that he seems unwilling to take seriously the ramifications of his limited inquiries into matters of definition. To this point, of the 223 pages of his book, *Secularization*, he spends less than one paragraph defining religion. From this point forward, he treats the definition offered on the first page as a neutral, universally applicable category. At one point, he does admit that the majority of his evidence comes from European Christianity,³³⁴ but explains that he will later take up the effects of secularization (of Christianity) in the West on other religions and societies. He concludes that since the entire world is having to deal with modernization, the secularization paradigm will likely work in more-or-less the same way abroad. To be fair, he argues that "*if other places modernize in ways similar to the European experience, then we can expect the nature and status of religion also to change in similar ways.*"³³⁵ The problem is that he ignores the challenges that many cultures and societies impose on his definition of religion. While he appears to be open to considering the differing systems of economic and technological modernization, he is seemingly unwilling to do

³²⁸ Bruce, *Secularization*, 3, 10, 14, 67-69, 70-80, 160.

³²⁹ Ibid., 3, 10, 160.

³³⁰ Ibid., 3, 16-17.

³³¹ Ibid., 69, 80, 145.

³³² Ibid., 10, 13-14, 22, 160.

³³³ Ibid., 10, 21, 88-89, 160.

³³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³³⁵ Ibid., 201.

the same for the concept of religion. This is one way in which his transhistorical and transcultural assumptions about religion limit the scope and reliability of his conclusions. On the topic of defining religion, he writes, “Social scientists spend far too much time quibbling over words, but it is useful to begin with some idea of the key concepts.”³³⁶ I am arguing that Bruce could afford to do more “quibbling over words” himself; in doing so, he may begin to see the limited scope of his theory and the problems it poses in many of the conclusions he draws.

While Bruce relies heavily on the criteria listed above, he also incorporates self-identification data. That is, many social surveys ask respondents to check a box that best describes their religious identity. It is very common, for example, to find a list of religious identities that mirror the chapter titles in a World Religions textbook: “Jewish,” “Christian,” “Muslim,” “Hindu,” “Buddhist,” etc. It is also quite common to find a number of Christian denominations listed alongside entire religions; for example, the Pew Research Center released their data from a 2007-2014 study of the American religious landscape, wherein respondents were given eight Christian options, including “Evangelical Protestant,” “Mainline Protestant,” “Catholic,” “Historically Black Protestant,” “Mormon,” and so on. The same survey glosses over denominational differences in non-Christian traditions, providing Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus only one choice, respectively.³³⁷ One problem that Bruce faces in some of his research is that while he traces an overall decline in church attendance, church membership, frequency of prayer, etc., people tend to, across the board, still identify with one of these religious demarcations.³³⁸ What might lead one to identify as, say, a “Evangelical Protestant” while also checking a number of boxes that indicate she does not attend service regularly, prays

³³⁶ Ibid., 1.

³³⁷ Cooperman, Smith, and Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 11-14, 28.

³³⁸ Bruce, *Secularization*, 21.

infrequently, and does not believe in a literal heaven and hell? Bruce looks to sociologist David Voas, who coins the term, “fuzzy fidelity.” In short, he argues that as people become less religious in practice, they continue to hold on to some aspects of their tradition, including their outward identification with the tradition. This is not a matter of a shifting religious landscape where the content evolves under the same name. Or, as he puts it, “Fuzzy fidelity is not a new kind of religion, or a proxy for as yet unfocused spiritual seeking; it is a staging post on the road from religious to secular hegemony.”³³⁹ In other words, when one continues to identify under a specific religious label, but demonstrates other instances of supposed decline, we should understand this to be an intermediary, confused, “fuzzy” step in the direction of secularity.

This seems to be a plausible explanation; however, it is hardly the only explanation. While Bruce uses Voas’s language to demonstrate an apparent loss of religiosity to explain away the higher rates at which respondents continue to self-identity as religious, I cannot help but wonder if instead it could be an indication that Bruce’s model is too rigid, narrow, and dated to capture evolving forms of religiosity where it is being explicitly expressed. There seems to be a looming question that goes largely unaddressed: *What is the source of the fuzziness: the subject or the survey?*

Let us now turn to Bruce’s secularization paradigm in order to first understand his argument and second look at the ways in which it relies upon the category of religion just described. Bruce’s secularization paradigm initially focuses on the displacement of Christianity (notably, church attendance) in the United Kingdom from 1850 to the present.³⁴⁰ In his more recent book, *Secularization*, he argues that these observations are indicators of a general decline

³³⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁴⁰ See Steve Bruce, *God is Dead*, 45-59.

in *religion*.³⁴¹ He argues that secularization is not limited to Western liberal democracies; secularization can be generalized, at least in theory, to the entire modernized (and modernizing) world. After giving an account of various non-Western societies and cultures that are experiencing secularization, he concludes, “Given the almost universal preference for greater personal autonomy and the strong international pressures that promote it, it is difficult to see how any religious tradition, no matter how popular, can remain immune.”³⁴² To recap, although the vast majority of Bruce’s data focus on particular aspects of Christianity in the UK over the past 150 years, the secularization paradigm is said to implicate all religion throughout the entire modern(izing) world.

He begins by explaining that the secularization paradigm is an exercise in description and explanation of social phenomena and it in no way intends to describe a law. He is not arguing that secularization is inevitable. Rather, it is an “attempt to explain common features of the recent past of modern industrial liberal democracies.”³⁴³ It is primarily concerned with the need or demand for religion because it assumes that when the need for religion declines, so too will its public expressions and institutional influence. As one generation has a lower demand for religion (due to economic and technological reasons, which will be addressed later), the subsequent generations are socialized in such a way that “it becomes harder for each generation to socialize its children in the faith.”³⁴⁴ To be clear, Bruce is not saying that secularization is inevitable; he makes very few predictions about the future. Rather, he looks at the recent history of the role of religion in emerging industrial liberal democracies in order to uncover a trend about the

³⁴¹ Bruce, *Secularization*, 23.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 201.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

relationship between religion and modernization. As societies become more technologically and scientifically advanced, religious reasons become less relevant.

He explains that the close relationship between modernization and secularization is due to the fact that modern industrial liberal democracies often result in a high degree of pluralism. The creation of the modern nation-state functioned to fragment the monopolistic control that religion once had over society. The power no longer resides with the single narrative of the church; it resides with the demos, who are intellectually, economically, and religiously diverse. In Berger's language, this places a number of reality-defining agencies on the table. Where one dominant religious explanation was long taken for granted, the emergence of multiple options in a highly differentiated society, religion becomes one choice among many. Furthermore, denominations become various religious choices within the larger spectrum of choice, thus calling into question each perspective's claim to objectivity or factuality.³⁴⁵ He explains that religion itself made considerable contributions to the trends of secularization. Protestantism engenders individualism; it fractures the control of the Catholic church. This eventually leads to a proliferation of denominationalism where individual literacy and education become trademarks of the Protestant ideal.³⁴⁶ He writes,

My case that the Reformation played a major part in laying the foundations for liberal democracy rests on the mechanism of unintended consequences. What were initially religious arguments inadvertently encouraged individualism, egalitarianism, and diversity, which in turn combined with growing social and structural differentiation³⁴⁷ to shift governments in the direction of secular liberal democracy.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 35.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 39.

Lastly, the strong economic growth that came as a result of industrialization created a situation where the wealthy became less religious and the poor found solace in religious justifications, such as, “The meek shall inherit the earth.”³⁴⁹ As people within industrialized liberal democracies became increasingly educated and wealthy, we see a decline in religiosity, according to Bruce.

Bruce then argues that although science has done much to challenge the viability of many religious claims, technology has in fact had a greater effect on the displacement of religion in the modern world. He argues that technology gives humans greater control over nature and thus they are left with less need for religion.³⁵⁰ As an example of this, he asks us to think of the farmer who no longer needs to pray for the rain because of the advances made in irrigation technology. He explains,

To summarize, the effects of science and technology on the plausibility of religious belief are often misunderstood. The direct clash of religious and scientific knowledge is less significant than the subtle impact of naturalistic ways of thinking. [...] The latter is pervasive. Science and technology have not made us atheists, but the underlying rationality and the subtle encouragement to self-aggrandisement make us less likely than our forebears to entertain the notion of a divine force external to our selves.³⁵¹

While I do not contest that technology has had a profound effect on some forms of religion, it would be difficult to find any sphere of society unaffected by its advances. However, this is a good example of the ways in which Bruce’s theory holds a narrow, traditional, and perhaps often misleading conception of religion at the core of his theory. From the vantage point of 21st century intellectualism – or, what Asad describes as the “modern cognitivist notion of religion” – it may appear to the observer that a community’s belief that a ceremonial dance could *cause* it to

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 42.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 47.

rain is both a supernatural and superstitious belief. It is all too common, however, for the observer to simply misunderstand or misrepresent the expressions of another. Susanne Langer argues, for example, that the performance of the rain dance among the Navajo is not necessarily performed with the hope that it may cause it to rain.³⁵² We must look beyond such cognitivist or intellectualist interpretations of ritual and language. Rather, the rain dance can be understood as a performance that *celebrates* the rain that is *likely* to come. She points out that while it is often performed during times of drought, it is initiated after rain clouds are observed. She explains that the rain dance is best understood as a tableau wherein the people, the gods, and nature are all important characters in a performance of appreciation. It is a recreation of the process of life itself. When it is performed and it does not rain, it is treated as a failed play – a play where some of the actors did not show up for the performance. When it does rain, it is seen as a successful recreation of life and thus its sacred celebration becomes vital to the community's religious identity. It brings the community together. If this is how we understand the rain dance, perhaps we can begin to understand the reasons it has persisted into the 21st century. It is not as if those who continue to perform the rain dance are holding onto a dissipating and irrational belief about a supposed causal relationship. Rather, their religion, if we choose to call it that, may go largely unaffected by Bruce's secularization paradigm.³⁵³

³⁵² Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 73-74.

³⁵³ There has likely been a decline in this practice, but it seems plausible that this has more to do with cultural and human genocide than the advances of science and technology. Furthermore, Bruce is intently focused on *beliefs* surrounding the rain dance. He fails to account for the Durkheimian notion of the sacred, which places the ritual's religious value on the community itself. In other words, it is not the beliefs that are sacred. Any story or ritual, irrespective of how it holds up to scientific or rational scrutiny, is sacred in that it is a practice of communing. The totem animal itself is irrelevant; there is no greater magical power or supernaturalism contained within the fox, for example. The totem is a reminder and manifestation of the community.

Critical Responses: Grace Davie, Thomas Luckmann, and José Casanova

A common challenge to Bruce's secularization thesis is that people are not becoming *less* religious; rather, they are becoming *differently* religious. One of the greatest proponents of this perspective is Grace Davie, who calls this shift, "believing without belonging."³⁵⁴ In short, she agrees with Bruce that the data show a decline in church attendance and church membership. However, she argues that this does not indicate a decline in *religion*, per se. Rather, there are compelling reasons to conclude that while we have witnessed a decline in church attendance and membership, this does not mean that people have stopped believing in God or a higher power.

To be clear, this is *not* my response to Bruce's secularization model. Both models assume a set of criteria for defining the category of religion that can be measured and compared over time. One simply has a broader, more flexible set of criteria. I am arguing that there is not an essence or set of criteria that can appropriately and consistently locate and measure religion across cultures and over time. This does not mean that religion cannot be located and measured at all. It is to say that the attempt to locate and measure religion will always exclude some forms of religiosity in favor of other forms – namely, a construction of the religious that is primarily informed by a Protestant, Western, post-Enlightenment worldview at the expense of non-Western, non-Protestant, non-cognitivist notions of the religious. This process will always shed more light on particular forms of religion – namely, the traditional, institutionalized, and Western forms. Not only does this fail to capture a fuller range of religiosity that may exist across cultures and individuals, it also functions to further legitimize a particular historical construction of the religious and the secular with various inscribed dimensions of power that serve some at the expense of others. Put differently, it removes the one defining from the project, which gives the

³⁵⁴ Davie, *Religion in Britain*, xxi.

unwarranted perception that the subject (i.e. “religion”) is a naturally existing and neutrally observable phenomenon that is expressed in more or less the same fashion throughout the world.

Bruce responds to Davie’s criticism by referring to other data that demonstrate the ways in which church attendance, membership, religious belief, and religious self-identification have been in consistent decline at relatively the same rate.³⁵⁵ He points out that in order for her to support her claim, she counts a variety of secular practices as religious because they take place in churches or other religious institutions.³⁵⁶ For example, she counts visits to cathedrals and churches as religious involvement. Initially, I found myself agreeing with Bruce on this point. I have, for example, visited Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame, St. Peter’s Basilica, and St. Paul’s Cathedral. In fact, I have voluntarily given money to some of these places. To count my visits as religious, however, would be misleading at best. I was a tourist doing touristy things. Of course, this does not mean that every tourist’s visit ought not be considered religious – think, for instance, of the religious meaning imbued in sacred pilgrimages. The reason I said that I *initially* found myself agreeing with Bruce is that one cannot count such visits as religious (and Davie would like) or irreligious (as Bruce insists). The point is that it is not only implausible, but impossible to quantify such data in terms of “religious” or “secular.” Such data can neither be included nor dismissed in such studies. There is simply no way of disaggregating such data into “religious” and “secular” expressions. One would have to perform qualitative research in order to begin to understand the nature of such data.

Sarah Williams, another critic of Bruce’s theory, argues that his model does not account for folk or popular forms of non-institutionalized religion.³⁵⁷ She defines popular religion as, “a

³⁵⁵ Bruce, *Secularization*, 82-84.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

generally shared understanding of religious meaning including both folk beliefs as well as formal and officially sanctioned practices and ideas, operating within a loosely bounded interpretive community.”³⁵⁸ In other words, popular religion is messy, often contradictory, and eludes traditional boundaries; therefore, Bruce’s model, which utilizes traditional, orthodox, institutionalized criteria is incapable of capturing various spectra of religiosity in any given society. I will say more about this concept in the final chapter when engaging Meredith McGuire’s, *Lived Religion*, so I will say only a few words for now. Bruce’s response to this criticism is that, like Grace Davie’s perspective, it fails to quantify and trace popular religion over time. He writes, “Like Davie’s believing-without-belonging, the popular religion refutation of the secularization thesis misses a vital element: there is little attention to change over time. [...] Unfortunately Williams does not show that popular religion persists.”³⁵⁹ In other words, Bruce is critical of Williams because, while she seems to convince him that popular religion existed at significant levels “beyond the churches” between 1880 and 1939 in Southwark, London, she cannot trace the persistence of popular religion to the present day. The problem with his response, however, is that if the very nature of popular religion is that it is always subject to change and not limited to the rigid boundaries of institutional beliefs and practices, then it seems rather unlikely that it could be traced over time. How can one demonstrate that “it” still exists if the very category is exceptionally dynamic, always changing, open to interpretation, and eluding traditional definition?

Another perspective that Bruce grapples with is offered by Thomas Luckmann.

Luckmann argues that religion is not in decline; rather, religion is becoming more individualistic

³⁵⁸ Sarah Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c. 1880-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 11.

³⁵⁹ Bruce, *Secularization*, 91.

and thus “invisible” to the sociologist who is looking at empty pews and sparse membership logs. In other words, like Davie, Luckmann argues that religion is changing and not necessarily evaporating. Bruce agrees to an extent when he writes, “The secularization paradigm has no argument with the claim that there has been an increase in individualistic this-worldly religion.”³⁶⁰ However, where Luckmann argues that restrictive definitions are problematic because they do not account for this change, Bruce argues that such shifts to individualism are contributing to secularization rather than serving as evidence to contest it.³⁶¹ He argues that “individuated religion (and this applies as much to ultra-liberal Christianity as to holistic spirituality) is unlikely to engender the same levels of commitment as traditional religion.”³⁶² Or, if one can continue to locate the religious in the individualistic trends that Luckmann points to, they will eventually slip into the secular.

Luckmann believes that while various features of modernization undermine traditional forms of religion (church involvement, authoritarian and overtly dogmatic religion, etc.) people’s inherent *need* for religion will persist and thus evolve over time. Again, in this process religion becomes more individualized, thus invisible to the traditional sociological tools for identifying and understanding religion. The change that religion is undergoing is simply not being identified by the models that sociologists are relying upon. Bruce’s problem with this is that those who defend such claims are unable to prove them; it is nearly impossible to measure the “invisible,” and those who attempt to do so are often relying upon erroneous parallels (saying, for example, that astrology, superstition, etc. are signs of this shift from institutional religion to individualized

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 103.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 112.

³⁶² Ibid., 113.

religion).³⁶³ Bruce points out that many non-religious, secular people also believe in superstition and astrology. Furthermore, many religious groups and churches actively preach against this type of practice as being heretical.

José Casanova, a sociologist of religion, is also critical of the secularization thesis. As he understands it, the secularization thesis can be reduced to three notable dimensions: 1) structural differentiation leads to a separation of religion from other spheres of society, such as politics, economics, science, etc., 2) as a result, the religious sphere undergoes a process of privatization, and 3) a decline in the social significance and authority of religion.³⁶⁴ Casanova argues that the first and third prongs are defensible, but the second prong – the privatization of religion – runs contrary to his observations. He is not arguing that the first and third prongs have been proven; rather, he argues that they are viable components of the secularization thesis. In other words, Casanova argues that the relationship between modernization and religion leads to “deprivatization” of the religious sphere rather than a retreat to the private sphere. Before further exploring his argument, it is worth noting that while I appreciate much of Casanova’s contributions to the secularization debate, he also assumes – contra Cavanaugh - that the religious sphere is analytically distinguishable from other non-religious spheres. That is, while he argues that conventional theories of secularization rely upon a restrictive category of religion that is incapable of accounting for public religions in the modern world, it falsely assumes that boundaries can be drawn appropriately and consistently around something called “religion” and other boundaries around “non-religious” or “secular” phenomena.

³⁶³ Ibid., 112-115.

³⁶⁴ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 1-2.

As previously stated, Casanova argues that secularization has not resulted in the privatization of religion, which conflicts with Luckmann's "invisible religion" thesis just discussed. Casanova argues that religious communities are unwilling to accept their place in the private sphere of society. He writes,

The central thesis of the present study is that we are witnessing the "deprivatization" of religion in the modern world. By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.³⁶⁵

He draws upon a number of examples where religious groups are increasingly becoming involved in politics, economics, etc.³⁶⁶ In doing so, he argues that religions are redrawing the boundaries that have been set for them by Enlightenment thinkers (Hume, Freud, etc.) and liberal theorists (such as Rousseau and Locke). Therefore, in light of such examples, it is incumbent upon the sociologist to rethink the assumed relationship between religion and modernity. To be clear, Casanova does not believe that the secularization thesis is a myth; it just needs to respond to the observations he raises. He writes, "I do not share the view that secularization was, or is, a myth."³⁶⁷

Casanova convincingly argues that the standard typological distinction between religious/private and secular/public can no longer be assumed in modern societies. This is where I find Casanova to be most valuable to my project; his criticisms reveal the constructed, largely non-representational nature of these broad categories that sociologists continue to employ. He demonstrates the ways in which the social sciences have ignored particular phenomenological

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁶⁶ He focuses on the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the rise of the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the role of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution, and the rise of Protestantism in American politics.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

examples in favor of convenient typological distinctions that prove to be more prescriptive than descriptive. Because of this, the assumption that religion would undergo decline over the centuries is inherently flawed. For example, while he believes that religion could be undergoing a general decline since the Enlightenment (an assumption I challenged in the previous chapter), he is not convinced by the available evidence. He explains that much of the evidence for religious decline relies on examples in Western Europe – the very place that gave birth to the Enlightenment and formulated widespread assumptions about religion, secularization, and modernity. In other words, the relationship between modernity and religion in Europe cannot be generalized because it is particularly tied to its Enlightenment past and Protestant assumptions about religion.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, one cannot trace decline if there is no agreement as to what is being measured. For example, he writes,

There is no consensus, perhaps there never will be, as to what counts as religion. Furthermore, even when there is agreement on the object of study, there is likely to be disagreement on what it is that one ought to be counting, that is to say, on which of the dimensions of religiosity (membership affiliation, beliefs, ritual and nonritual practices, experiences, doctrinal knowledge, and their behavioral and ethical effects) one should measure and how various dimensions should be ranked and compared. Finally, one should be very careful when applying to non-Western religions categories and measures derived from the study of Western religion.³⁶⁹

That is to say, standard sociological typologies are inadequately assessing the role of religion in modern society. This is another point where we agree. Casanova is arguing that secularization theorists are wrong to assume that religion naturally belongs to the private sphere and that there are contemporary forms of evidence demonstrating the contrary. He explains that this was an Enlightenment assumption that continues to occupy a space in the modern sociological

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 28-30.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 26.

imaginary.³⁷⁰ The assumption was that the “‘darkness’ of religious ignorance and superstition would fade away when exposed to the ‘lights’ of reason.”³⁷¹ This, Casanova points out, did not happen.

Where Casanova and I disagree is the extent to which the secularization thesis can be salvaged. He urges sociologists to account for the deprivatization of religion, which ought to force them to rethink some prevalent assumptions about the relationship between religion on modernity. That is, he argues that the secularization thesis can be improved. He writes,

In order to be able to conceptualize such possibilities the theory of secularization will need to reconsider three of its particular, historically based – that is, ethnocentric – prejudices: its bias for Protestant subjective forms of religion, its bias for “liberal” conceptions of politics and of the “public sphere,” and its bias for the sovereign nation-state as the systemic unit of analysis.³⁷²

I agree that it can be improved in some ways, but only if it abandons the assumption that religion is a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon that can be adequately and consistently measured over time. In other words, the secularization thesis becomes increasingly viable as it particularizes and narrows its focus. I will say more on this in the final chapter, but I mention it now to illustrate one way in which Casanova’s theory remains problematic. That is, if sociologists heed his advice and divest their theories of such prejudices, they are left with an increasingly analytically complex category of religion. In other words, to sustain a single category of religion is to hold onto many of these prejudices, political constructions, and Protestant assumptions. I am arguing that religion, as it exists historically throughout the world, is an exceedingly dynamic category. This is not to say that religion does not exist; rather, it is that religion exists in such innumerable variations across cultures and throughout history that it

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 30.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 30-31.

³⁷² Ibid., 38-39.

raises serious doubts as to whether “it” can be located and measured in the way that secularization theory necessitates.

What Secularization?: Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and William Bainbridge

Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and William Bainbridge offer the most extensive and comprehensive criticisms of the secularization paradigm. Combined they have written dozens of books and articles that directly address the most pertinent factors of secularization theory. For the sake of space, this section will focus on two of these texts that offer the most comprehensive engagement with the topic: *The Future of Religion: Revival and Cult Formation* (1985)³⁷³ and *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (2000).³⁷⁴ The former establishes many of the fundamental components of an alternative theory to secularization while the latter is a more carefully crafted and refined response to the secularization paradigm, as articulated by a number of 20th century sociologists.

Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge offer a rebuttal of the secularization thesis, wherein they claim that religion has not been in decline. Instead, they argue that when secularization occurs, it is followed by instances of religious revivalism and innovation.³⁷⁵ While the content of religion is always changing, there is no evidence of religious decline. *The Future of Religion* begins with the claim that since the Enlightenment, Western intellectuals have been predicting the decline and eventual disappearance of religion. “Social scientists,” they write, “have particularly excelled in predicting the impending triumph of reason over ‘superstition.’”³⁷⁶

³⁷³ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 1-5.

³⁷⁴ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 27-30.

³⁷⁵ Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 2.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

However, Stark and Bainbridge continue to see religion throughout the world, thus concluding that Enlightenment assumptions about secularization must be reconsidered.³⁷⁷ They are not denying every aspect of the secularization thesis; rather, they are accounting for the fact that religion still remains an active and vibrant aspect of modern society. They claim that with secularization (or secularizing forces) comes *innovation*.³⁷⁸ Social scientists have assumed that religion will remain on a consistent downward trajectory and although some have presented compelling evidence of such decline, they did not account for the ways in which religion responds to secularization. They admit that religion has been forced to change in many ways, but they deny the religious decline aspect of prominent secularization theories and Enlightenment critique of religion. In any bout of decline, religion's innovation leads to a reactive revivalism. They write, "The history of religion is not only a pattern of decline; it is equally a portrait of birth and growth. We argue that the sources of religion are shifting constantly in societies but that the amount of religion remains relatively constant."³⁷⁹

Stark and Bainbridge then offer their definition of religion, which is similar to the definitions that Bruce and Berger rely upon. They write, "*religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, of force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural.*" (italics in the original)³⁸⁰ In short, they agree that religion must include the supernatural. They concede that this does not capture the range of religions that exist in the world, but that sociology demands a definition of religion that is neither too narrow nor too broad so that it can distinguish the religious from the

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 1-2.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

secular.³⁸¹ The underlying assumption is that the religious and the secular can be distinguished from one another and that they exist naturally in the world in more or less the same fashion, both of which I have already argued against. They later provide five components of religion, adding to this definition. They say that religion consists of 1) a *belief* that their doctrine is true, 2) a set of *practices* of worship and devotion toward the supernatural, 3) *experience* or communication with the supernatural, 4) *knowledge* or understanding of the central tenets of their religious culture, and 5) *consequences*, which refers to how people should consequently live their lives with respect to the previous dimensions.³⁸² Much like Berger and Bruce, they rely upon notably Protestant-Western assumptions about religion, which will be discussed later in this section.

Their argument relies upon an economic theory of human behavior. They argue that people seek rewards while attempting to avoid costs. Religion offers rewards and costs that do not necessarily exist in the material world. That is, because people cannot attain some types of rewards within this world, they create compensators, which are rewards that will be attained at a future time or in another realm, such as in an afterlife. For example, while one may suffer physically and economically in this world, religion provides a compensator that may offer the reward of eternal bliss where the body is made whole again and money has no value.³⁸³ It is important to note that compensators do not necessarily need to be *religious*; people create compensators for all sorts of rewards that they cannot immediately attain. For example, writing this dissertation is providing me with very few rewards at this moment; any personal edification gained is greatly outweighed by the pain and suffering it is bringing to my life.³⁸⁴ However, I

³⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

³⁸² Ibid., 9-10.

³⁸³ Ibid., 7-10.

³⁸⁴ I am somewhat joking. Somewhat.

choose to continue to write the dissertation because of a compensator: at some future point, the successful completion of the dissertation will lead to greater opportunities for employment, a higher salary, my colleagues' respect, and so on. In addition to these types of compensators, people also want answers to a variety of existential questions that cannot be answered in the here and now (e.g. What is the meaning of life?, What happens after we die?, Where did we come from? etc.).³⁸⁵ According to Stark and Bainbridge, compensators become religious when they involve the supernatural. That is, religious compensators are created to supply answers and rewards to questions and problems that cannot be answered in this world.³⁸⁶ The presence of religious compensators allows religions to adapt and evolve in the modern world, so long as they continue to involve the supernatural. As our understanding of the natural world continues to evolve (or improve) over time, the line distinguishing the natural from the supernatural shifts as well. This is why Stark and Bainbridge argue that religion is not disappearing, but rather evolving.

To explain this process, which is tied to the economic-theory of religious evolution, they provide an overview of the differences between “churches,” “sects,” and “cults.”³⁸⁷ Churches, they clarify, are low-tension institutions that are large in size and highly integrated into their surrounding society. They explain that members of churches are usually well-adjusted to dominant social norms and mores; for example, they take moderate stances on drinking, dancing, sex, marriage, etc. Also, the theologies of churches tend to be universal. That is, the goal is to

³⁸⁵ Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion*, 7.

³⁸⁶ “This profound difference in compensator-generating capacity is why we have chosen to define religion as *human organizations primarily engages in providing general compensators based on supernatural assumptions*.” Ibid., 8.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 19-35.

convert everyone and to shape society.³⁸⁸ Sects, on the other hand, are more separatist. They withdraw from the general society to a greater degree than churches and members are usually acquired through conversion rather than by birth. Sects are often seen as “movements,” as they are usually reacting to something in society, not trying to be continuous with society.³⁸⁹ Although churches are definitely in the business of resisting change in order to hold onto tradition, sects are often the result of high-tension schisms within the church, which produces an outcome of greater tension with general society. They explain,

Religious schisms are inevitable. [...] No religious group can be both church and sect, congratulating powerful members for obtaining scarce rewards while promulgating compensators that substitute for them. The most successful otherworldly organizations will always tend to be transformed into more worldly faiths, thus abandoning their historical constituency. Relatively deprived persons will defect into schism, reestablishing a less worldly faith more able to provide efficacious specific compensators.³⁹⁰

In other words, sects become sects because they are dissatisfied with the concessions being made by the church to the surrounding society. As the church becomes less distinguishable from society, sects are produced as an effort to recapture the tradition that is slowing being replaced by secularizing forces. As sects grow and acquire a greater percentage of the general population, by definition they become more like their surrounding society and their compensators become more generalized and worldly. This places them in lower tension with society because in order to grow they have to be more accommodating to social norms and standards. If the sect leader keeps the tension high with specific compensators, the sect will not likely grow.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 21.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 21.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 124.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 25-26.

Cults have even higher rates of tension with the surrounding society and the compensators offered tend to appeal to a smaller number of investors.³⁹² If they offered more generally interesting compensators, they would begin to slide into the status of a sect or a church for reasons discussed earlier. As an example of this, Stark and Bainbridge turn to Scientology, a cult that attempts to maintain its high-tension claims.³⁹³ When joining Scientology, members are often asked to isolate themselves from the general public and their families because maintaining such relationships would exacerbate the already present tensions. This is because Scientology offers very specific compensators that are in conflict with much of what general society holds to be true. For example, to become “clear” is a state of being where one achieves, “Good Memory, Raised I.Q., Strong Will Power, Magnetic Personality, Amazing Vitality, Creative Imagination.”³⁹⁴ The compensators that need to be protected, they claim, are found within “Dianetics,” the magic that Hubbard invented or discovered almost 70 years ago. In other words, Hubbard’s “Dianetics” does not pass muster in the face of modern scientific reasoning. Moving away from this magic in order to alleviate the tension would be the secularization process in action, which The Church of Scientology has actively fought against.³⁹⁵

New movements tend to be small and in highest tension with the surrounding society. Over time they begin to adjust to the social norms because it is difficult to sustain the cohesion of the group with such high tension. It is common for them to disappear or ease into society, becoming churches in due time. Then churches lose members because they are in such a low-tension state that they cannot differentiate themselves from society in general. This oscillation

³⁹² Ibid., 24.

³⁹³ Ibid., 263-283.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 266.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 268-271.

between “church,” “sect,” and “cult” is an ongoing and amorphous process that resists the type of secularization described by Berger and Bruce. Put differently, instances of secularization lead to innovative religious responses that will carry people and traditions along this oscillating course. To be clear, Stark and Bainbridge do not argue that secularization is a myth or that secularization is not an observable fact. Rather, they agree that secularization *has* occurred. They write, “Secularization is nothing new, it is occurring constantly in all religious economies. Through secularization, sects are tamed and transformed into churches.”³⁹⁶ Steve Bruce, however, argues that secularization is an irreversible process³⁹⁷ while Stark and Bainbridge argue that secularization leads to religious revivalism or innovation.³⁹⁸ They explain,

We see no reason to suppose that the diffusion of science will make humans in the future less motivated to escape death, less affected by tragedy, less inclined to ask, “what does it all mean?” True, science can challenge *some* of the claims made by historic religions, but it cannot provide the primary satisfaction that have long been the *raison d’être* of religions.³⁹⁹

Their point is that they find no reason to conclude that the rise of science will lead to the death of God. People continue to face death and they continue to have questions they cannot answer. These questions, Stark and Bainbridge claim, are the heart of religion. This is clearly where they disagree with Bruce. Bruce argues that observable decline in church attendance, frequency of prayer, and religious activity is indicative of an overall decline in religion, which again is irreversible. Stark and Bainbridge do not necessarily contest the data (although they do at times); they argue that irrespective of such decline, the core of religion remains present because humans will always search for other-worldly compensators.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 430.

³⁹⁷ Bruce, *Secularization*, 132.

³⁹⁸ Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion*, 477.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 431.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

Let us look briefly at their explanation of the secularization process before moving on to a more recent and comprehensive explanation found in Rodney Stark and Roger Finke's, *Acts of Faith*. Stark and Bainbridge explain that with the rise of the natural and physical sciences, many churches have had to reconsider their positions on various matters. Scientists quickly rise to a culture's elite status because they are able to defend their claims successfully within the bounds of reason. Once churches adopt the positions outlined by science, they are becoming more secularized, discarding magical claims for natural explanations.⁴⁰¹ Secularization, thus, causes churches to be in less tension with their environments and, in order to retain membership they are forced to jettison various supernatural claims.⁴⁰²

According to Stark and Bainbridge, there are two primary responses to secularization: revivalism and innovation.⁴⁰³ Revivalism is the reassertion of the very claims that are being rejected by the dominant surrounding society, which are often informed by the emerging scientific communities. They explain that these movements do not tend to last very long, as it is only a matter of time that they will be consumed by its critics. They explain that it is "chronically vulnerable to secularization and [lacks] long-term staying power, especially if there is an alternative."⁴⁰⁴ That alternative is religious "innovation." Many of the religious traditions of today established their beliefs and customs thousands of years ago, in a pre-scientific era. The compensators that were provided then were answers to a different set of questions.⁴⁰⁵ "That is, they were well suited to the culture in which they arose – they did not make claims that were

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 432-434.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 433.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 435.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 436.

obviously false at the time.”⁴⁰⁶ To apply those same compensators in our contemporary understanding of the world is ineffective. In order for religion to persist, it must innovate the types of compensators that it offers. “In our judgment,” they explain, “faiths suited to the future will contain no magic, only religion. [...] Faiths containing only religion will be immune to scientific attack and thus will avoid the accelerated secularization in effect during recent centuries.”⁴⁰⁷ In short, their theory of religion accepts various instances of secularization but concludes that, because there will always be fundamental and important unanswerable questions, there will always be a need for other-worldly compensators.⁴⁰⁸ The content of these questions and compensators will change over time, so where Berger and Bruce see a loss of religion Stark and Bainbridge see evidence of religious innovation.

In 2000, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke published, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, as a response to sociological developments in secularization theory. They begin with a criticism of what they call the “old paradigm” of social scientific research, which, according to them, is firmly rooted in a post-Enlightenment critique of religion. In response, they introduce the “the new paradigm,” which not only rejects all components of the old paradigm but also proposes alternative answers to each component. They argue that the social sciences that were born out of the Enlightenment begin with the assumption that religion was false.⁴⁰⁹ Think, for example, of Feuerbach’s projection theory, which proclaims that theology is anthropology.⁴¹⁰ Or David Hume, who pits science against religion, claiming that science is the only appropriate

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 435.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 456.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 527.

⁴⁰⁹ See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁴¹⁰ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 270.

way to understand the world.⁴¹¹ Or Freud, who says that religion is an illusion and that religious people suffer from neurosis.⁴¹² Or the ways in which Voltaire and Hobbes openly work under the assumption that religion is false.⁴¹³ Stark and Finke see these as instances of open, widespread atheism in the social sciences that effectively establish and codify a number of assumptions about the credibility and value of religion in the modern world. The overarching assumption is that religion will eventually be displaced by science and reason in the modern world.

In contrast to these assumptions and predictions, Stark and Finke argue that religion has not only *not* disappeared, it is stronger than ever.⁴¹⁴ In order to frame their argument, they begin with a more detailed overview of the “old paradigm.” In sum, they argue that the old paradigm not only assumes that religion is false, but that it also causes harm to religious believers and society at large.⁴¹⁵ It assumes that religious institutions, beliefs, and practices will lose their social significance in light of modernization and that religion is a *secondary* phenomenon (i.e. that religion is a *response* to the material world).⁴¹⁶ They argue that proponents of the old paradigm often treat religion as fundamentally psychological, thus overlooking a plethora of religious expressions. Lastly, they argue that their primary concern is to condemn the harmful effects of religious pluralism, which reveals the human origins of religion.⁴¹⁷ In contrast to the old paradigm, they present the new paradigm, which, they explain, “not only rejects each of the

⁴¹¹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 2-3.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29. Put differently, the old paradigm tends to ignore the social significance of religion and sees religion not as something that is primary in human nature, but rather as a reflection of some other more primary phenomena (i.e. human reaction to fear, existential search for answers, etc.).

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

elements of the old paradigm outlined above, it proposes the precise opposite of each.”⁴¹⁸ In short, it argues that religion is not a projection of human ideals or a reflection of human desires; it is a fundamental aspect of humanity.⁴¹⁹ Religion is not harmful to people; it is a source of betterment for both the individual and society.⁴²⁰ In other words, religion is a social good. They argue that the secularization thesis is essentially false; religion is not in decline and there is no consistent relationship between modernity and religiosity.⁴²¹ They claim that the secularization thesis does not account for the high degree of variability in religious expression and modernity. Furthermore, they explain that “the spread of science cannot result in secularization, because science and religion are unrelated.”⁴²²

At this point, Stark and Finke begin to describe the new paradigm, which they explain accounts for the social aspects of religion within a pluralistic religious economy of rational “buyers.” Religions, they argue, function like market economies that seek to attain followers who have a consistently high demand for religion. Religious institutions are the suppliers of the beliefs and practices, which can be understood as the “product.”⁴²³ The more pluralistic the society, the more options from which people have to choose, which leads to a greater sense of competition amongst the suppliers. While Bruce argues that such pluralism leads to a sense of relativism, Stark and Finke argue that it leads to religious innovation. That is, it is not that each option’s truth claim becomes relative and increasingly implausible; rather, with pluralism comes newer, adapted forms of religion that better respond to questions in the modern world. They

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 33.

⁴²² Ibid., 33.

⁴²³ Ibid., 35-36.

write, “Rather than eroding the plausibility of all faiths, competition results in eager and efficient suppliers of religion, just as it does among suppliers of secular commodities, and with the same results: far higher levels of overall ‘consumption.’”⁴²⁴ As they clearly contradict Bruce’s argument that pluralism will lead to secularization, they also argue that rationality will not lead to religious decline. That is because, they explain, the choices people make in being religious are not irrational, as Bruce seems to assume. Rather, Stark and Finke claim that religious “buyers” are choosing rewards at a high cost and are not, as the old paradigm would like to claim, simply brainwashed.

Their point is that choices about religion (to be religious, what to do because of one’s religion, etc.) are rational. The rational choice model for explaining behavior is prevalent in every part of social scientific theory, but absent from theories of religion. Why? Stark and Finke believe that the rational choice model applies appropriately to the topic of religiosity and that the only reason it has not been consistently applied is due to the lasting power of the Enlightenment critique of religion. That is, assumptions about religion and modernity have obscured the ways in which sociologists have treated theories of secularization. Stark and Finke claim that people base their religious choices on a variety of cost-benefit calculations, which is entirely rational.⁴²⁵ They explain, “What we are saying is that religious behavior – to the degree that it occurs – is generally based on cost/benefit calculations and is therefore rational behavior in precisely the same sense that other human behavior is rational.”⁴²⁶ This, of course, ignores much of the irrational *content* of some of the beliefs themselves, but this is not their point. Regardless of the content, the choice to accept any number of costs for potential benefits is a rational process. It is

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 44-45.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 56.

also worth noting that Stark, Finke, and Bainbridge rely upon largely functional definitions of religion (religion motivates people to incur costs and seek rewards) while Bruce and Berger rely upon largely substantive definitions of religion (religion is essentially a set of beliefs and practices involving supernatural entities). This difference alone allows each side to locate contrasting rates of religiosity. In other words, while the content of some religious systems will change (and thus disappear) over time, the need for compensators will remain consistently high.

Again, the foundation of their argument is that people are essentially rational decision-makers. We want rewards and benefits and we try to avoid costs.⁴²⁷ Additionally, people create explanations for what benefits and costs are likely to ensue. Not all of the desired rewards will be available in this world. For example, it is common for people to have the desire to overcome death. Therefore, people create compensators in a distant future: the afterlife. When rewards are rare or unavailable, people are willing to accept explanations that defer the attainment of benefits until a distant, unverifiable future.⁴²⁸ Religion, they explain, is first and foremost concerned with supernatural rewards, even though the decision-making process is entirely rational. The only difference between these decisions and other more mundane, this-worldly decisions, is that the religious decisions have more valuable payoffs.

They go on to explain that all religious groups encounter a certain degree of *tension* with the surrounding culture or environment.⁴²⁹ Seeing that this is consistent with Stark and Bainbridge's argument in *The Future of Religion*, which was discussed in the previous section, I will be brief. To recap, churches are low-tension institutions that are largely accepted by the larger socio-cultural environment. Cults are high-tension groups, which means that it is more

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 88-90.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 143.

expensive to belong. That is, the members of a cult incur higher material, social, and psychological costs.⁴³⁰ The question, then, is: Why are people willing to pay such high prices, or make such large sacrifices? The simple answer is that while they might be expensive, they offer extremely high *value*.⁴³¹ Value is the key. Think of the small cult that offers a ride on a passing-by comet, which will transport them to their own eventual and eternal planet. The only thing a member must do is commit suicide. This is an extremely high price, of course, but the value of eternal community and bliss is deemed valuable enough for some members to join. A high price, but it comes with extremely high value. To contrast this, we can look to low-tension churches. They demand an overall lower level of commitment from their members, but they offer more modest rewards.

Again, Stark and Finke argue that religiously pluralistic societies produce high levels of religiosity. Competition is difficult to measure, but they do see pluralism as a form of religious competition. They claim that in a free market where there is a high degree of competition there will be a high level of diversity, which will lead to higher levels of religiosity.⁴³² This is why we see high levels of religiosity in America but not in Europe, where there are restrictions on the market. Many European countries, such as England, have state sponsored religions, which eliminates the need to compete for followers. The market is not free. State religions, which are common in Europe, limit the free competition; there is not equal access to public space, funding, etc. This also creates complacent clergy who do not need to sell their product because they receive consistent funding, irrespective of church membership.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 154.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 145.

⁴³² Ibid., 219-221.

To contrast a number of European examples, in the United States religious groups must work harder for their vitality. Stark and Finke claim, again, that this creates a vibrant religious economy where the suppliers (religious groups) have to cater to the needs and desires of population. This is challenging the one-directional attitude of secularization thesis and other aspects of the old paradigm. As churches come to be in lower tension with surrounding society or environment, they do not evaporate into the secular world. There are instances of cult and sect formation – innovation that moves away from secularizing tendencies of blending in with the surrounding society.⁴³³ In conclusion, Stark and Finke contend that social scientists have been predicting the end of religion since the Enlightenment.⁴³⁴ They have consistently predicted that religion would not be able to stand in the face of the modern world, which is dominated by reason, technological advances, and pluralistic societies. They claim that social scientists have long overlooked the fact that religious organizations have been adapting their beliefs, customs, and practices to better reflect the needs and desires of society and the individuals who inhabit it. Sociologists, they argue, continue to ignore the lasting presence of religion and instead “each new outburst of religious vigor is quickly dismissed as the last spasm of anti-modernity, as the last gasp of irrationality, soon to be routed in the final battle of the culture wars.”⁴³⁵

Before returning to Steve Bruce’s comments on the matter, let us briefly consider the ways in which Stark and Finke rely upon a category of religion that is not only narrowly constructed, but anachronistically applied to past forms of piety. They argue, contra Bruce, that levels of religiosity were in fact *not* very high in medieval Europe. “As for the ordinary people,” they write, “during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, they rarely heard mass *anywhere*, most

⁴³³ Ibid., 257-260.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 274.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 274.

entering a church only for weddings, funerals, and christenings (if then), and their private worship was directed toward an array of spirits and supernatural agencies, only some of them recognizably Christian.”⁴³⁶ They go on to explain that many dioceses throughout Europe were without clergy, suffered from low attendance, and performed mass in Latin, a language that most parishioners could not understand.⁴³⁷ In short, they claim that medieval Europe was quite irreligious, especially when compared to a number of modern Industrialized nations. They explain, “The evidence is clear that claims about a major decline in religious participation in Europe are based in part on very exaggerated perceptions of past religiousness. Participation may be low today in many nations, but not because of modernization, and the secularization thesis is therefore irrelevant.”⁴³⁸ The problem with this sentiment is that it directly contradicts the very model of religious innovation and evolution that is fundamental to their social theory of religion. In other words, their argument is that religion has not declined and the reason some sociologists erroneously indicate secularization is because they are inappropriately interpreting change as decline. After laboriously explicating the detailed and complex machinations of their economic theory of religious revivalism, they immediately commit the same error that has been the focus of their criticisms. That is, in claiming that medieval Europe was not very religious, they are anachronistically measuring the religious expressions of a distant and foreign past. While I will come back to Meredith McGuire’s work in more detail in the final chapter, it’s worth noting her take on the matter now. She writes,

When we fail to recognize that our conceptual apparatus has been shaped by such battles over [definitional] boundaries, we risk misapprehending our data and misusing our sociological interpretations. A prime example of such failing is sociologists Rod Stark and Roger Finke’s misuses of historical accounts of medieval European religion. They

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 68.

depict medieval Christians as having a very low degree of religiosity, based on such indicators as the paucity and small capacity of parish churches, laypeople's sparse church attendance and infrequent reception of Communion, improper behavior in church, and widespread ignorance of church doctrines and church-prescribed religious practices.⁴³⁹

Rather than assume that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural reality that can be measured consistently and accurately over time, it is perhaps more responsible for sociologists and philosophers to spend more time mining the reasons they continue to rely upon such faulty, malleable, and largely non-representative categories. While church attendance may have in fact been quite low during the medieval period when compared to rates of attendance in, say, 21st century America, one cannot simply conclude that this is indicative of religious revivalism. Church attendance may be an appropriate way to measure some forms of modern Protestant religiosity because Protestantism has long preached that each individual is responsible for their own relationship with God and scripture. The medieval Catholic worldview, however, may not have located religiosity in the same way. It was common belief that the priest would perform the ceremonies on behalf of the community (which is why there was less pressure for the community to learn Latin or for Mass to be conducted in the vernacular). For one to be religious, she did not necessarily have to take part in – or even understand – the religious rituals and ceremonies that were conducted on their behalf.

We have already seen the ways in which two camps can come to such contradictory conclusions about secularization. Perhaps it is time for sociological and philosophical analyses of secularization account for the constructed nature of the categories employed. I will argue that in doing so, we can begin to reveal potential underlying political influences that remain present in

⁴³⁹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 23.

such sociological theories, which may be the most plausible explanation for why theorists like Steve Bruce and Rodney Stark remain committed to opposing sides of this debate.

Returning briefly to Steve Bruce, we will see that his criticisms of Stark and Finke differ in kind but, like Stark and Finke, also assume that religion is a universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon. For example, he points out that their conclusion that there is a positive correlation between pluralism and religious vitality are anomalous. In other words, while they claim to come to this conclusion, other social theorists have repeatedly reached the opposite conclusion. Bruce writes,

The rest of us can simply note that the procedures may come close to cooking the books. When others tried to replicate Finke and Stark's work, they failed. Land and colleagues analysed US county-level data for over 700 counties that contained the 150 cities studied by Finke and Stark. In both cases they came to the opposite conclusion. For the large sample, diversity was associated with low rates of church attendance.⁴⁴⁰

Much like Stark and Finke, Bruce's approach works under the assumption that religion is an identifiable and quantifiable aspect of society that can be traced over time and across cultures in a consistent manner. They simply disagree with what the data demonstrate. One reason they come to such different conclusions is that they are measuring different things. For example, Bruce points to the work of Mark Chaves and Philip P. Gorski, who analyze 193 existing studies on the relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality. They note that conventional wisdom, which is based largely on a handful of studies carried out by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, has indicated a positive relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality.⁴⁴¹ Chaves and Gorski's conclusion, which Bruce references, is that there is no such positive relationship. In fact, they observe, "A positive relationship between religious pluralism

⁴⁴⁰ Bruce, *Secularization*, 144-145.

⁴⁴¹ Mark Chaves and Philip Gorski, "Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no.1 (2001): 261.

and religious participation can be found only in a limited number of contexts, while the concepts themselves translate poorly to nonmodern [sic] settings.”⁴⁴² Further, they state that, “The relationship between pluralism and vitality is not uniformly positive, but neither is it uniformly negative.”⁴⁴³ [...] The quest for a general law about the relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation should be abandoned.”⁴⁴⁴ That is, after analyzing almost two-hundred studies on the potential relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality, the results were so inconsistent and varied, no warranted conclusions can be drawn. Chaves and Gorski then provide five suggestions for future study that may lead to more consistent results. While doing so, they repeatedly point to the inherent complexities of the various possible relationships between religious pluralism and religious vitality.⁴⁴⁵ However, they fail to address the most looming problem in all of these studies: there is no consistent methodological approach of categorizing and measuring religion, which lies at the very foundation of the hypotheses found in all of these studies, including those by Bruce and Stark and Finke.

Should we be surprised that the relationships between religious pluralism and religious vitality inconsistently differ in the contexts of Russia, the United States, and Canada?⁴⁴⁶ Furthermore, there is no agreement as to how each of these studies defines the criteria for locating religion. Each study is, therefore, essentially measuring different subjects. What if there was shared criteria across these studies, one might ask? Would that fix the problem? I am arguing that even if we consistently use the same criteria across various cultures and throughout history, this fails to capture the plurality of ways in which the religious manifests across cultures

⁴⁴² Ibid., 274.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 274-275.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 278.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 276.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 270-272.

and time. At some point, one must address the larger question: Is it possible to adequately locate and measure the religious in its various, complex expressions? The demands of serious sociological inquiry seem too strict to account for the amorphous, dynamic, malleable, multi-cultural, constantly evolving, inherently dynamic category of religion. In lieu of being able to provide a representative category, sociological surveys and studies have opted to largely ignore this problem in favor of a narrowly constructed, Western category of religion.

As I opened this chapter with the early contributions of Peter Berger, who in many ways introduces the secularization debate, I would like to close it with a passage from an interview he gave to *Boston University Today* in 2011. The interviewer asks, “You write that sociology has ‘moved in directions that are uncongenial to me.’ How so?” Berger’s response perfectly summarizes the argument I have tried to make in the past two chapters. He replies,

One I call methodological fetishism, which means that you only study things that can be quantified. Quantification is sometimes useful. But things that are more complex are very hard to put in a survey. Some sociologists have decided that Japan is a very secular country. If you know anything about Japan, that’s crazy. It’s full of religious movements. The questionnaires that are used are based on Western bias; if you ask a Buddhist, “Do you believe in God?” that’s a meaningless question. So you get sociologists saying, “They don’t believe in God; that means they’re atheists.” The other one is that sociology for many has become an ideological instrument, mostly advocating various countercultural or left-of-center causes. If a science becomes simply advocacy, it ceases to be a science.⁴⁴⁷

Like Berger, I am questioning the degree to which secularization theories remain to be appropriately “scientific” or sufficiently representative and I am raising the possibility that many theorists engaged in such debates are employing couched political arguments about the social value of religion.

⁴⁴⁷ Peter Berger, “Peter Berger and the Making of a Sociologist,” interview by Rich Barlow, *BU Today*, July 2011, <https://www.bu.edu/today/2011/peter-berger-and-the-making-of-a-sociologist/>.

CHAPTER 5:

SECULARIZATION? WHO CARES?

The Pew Research Center's forum on "Religion and Public Life" released the results of a two-phase study, which is titled, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious: Modest Drop in Overall Rates of Belief and Practice, but Religiously Affiliated Americans Are as Observant as Before."⁴⁴⁸ In this study, researchers surveyed Americans in 2007 and again in 2014 in order to compare rates of religiosity over time. It is surveys such as this one that social theorists like Steve Bruce and Rodney Stark rely upon in order to draw general conclusions about the relationship between religion and modernity. In the following paragraphs, I would like to demonstrate the ways in which such surveys also rely upon Western-Protestant influenced criteria that are increasingly incapable of capturing a variety of religious expressions that exist beyond the perceived boundaries of the religious. While other well-respected surveys on religion in public life also commit many of the same errors outlined in the following pages, I have decided to focus on one survey in order to offer a deeper analysis. Furthermore, the Pew survey presents the most detailed and complex data sets that I have come across in my research.

Surveying more than 35,000 American adults in 2007 and then again in 2014, the Pew survey concludes that "Yes, at least by some *key measures* [italics mine] of what it means to be a religious person," the "American public is becoming less religious."⁴⁴⁹ The focus of this section will be on how such surveys define "religion" and "religiosity" in order to argue that such "key measures" are limited in their scope and thus incapable of capturing a variety of non-traditional and non-Western religious expressions. The survey analysis also concludes that there is a "great

⁴⁴⁸ Cooperman, Smith, and Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 10.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

deal of stability in the U.S. religious landscape” and that the apparent decrease in religiosity is “largely attributable to the ‘nones.’”⁴⁵⁰ On the first point – that there is a great deal of stability – I argue that this is indicative of the increasing power and influence of traditional criteria used to define the religious and religiosity. In other words, traditional forms of religion – measured by church attendance, belief in God, and frequency of prayer, e.g. – continue to appropriately describe a dominant and aging population of religious people in the United States. On the second point – that the rise of the nones is the best explanation of the apparent decline of religiosity – I argue that this may be indicative of the lacking explanative power of traditional criteria used to define the religious and religiosity among Millennials and non-traditional, non-Western forms of religion. In short, the category of religion utilized in studies such as this one continues to promote an existing and dominant type of religiosity while, on the other hand, becoming increasingly inadequate to capture other, non-traditional and non-Western forms of religiosity. Furthermore, by employing a narrow and traditional category of religion, such surveys are *reinforcing* a particular form of religion at the expense of other already existing and possible emerging forms of religion.

As stated in the previous paragraphs, the Pew survey concludes that the American public is becoming less religious by some key measures. These “key measures” are the ways in which the category of religion is defined and measured. In short, the survey defines religion and religiosity by measuring four key factors: 1) frequency of prayer, 2) church attendance, 3) belief in God, and 4) self-assessment of the importance of religion in their lives.⁴⁵¹ Additional criteria are added to these four key measures, which include “belief in heaven,” “belief that scripture is

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 3, 10, 21, 23, 25, 43.

the word of God,” “belief in hell,” and “religious identity” (e.g. “Jewish,” “Christian,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” “none,” etc.). Considering the analysis of the genealogical construction of the category of religion presented in the third chapter of this dissertation, we can see that contemporary surveys on religion and religiosity continue to promote a Western, Protestant, post-Enlightenment category of religion. While such surveys appear to be measuring a broad, transhistorical, and transcultural presence of religion, they covertly give the old hierarchical structure (that Tomoko Masuzawa unveils) a new lease on its power and persuasion. Within the apparent inclusiveness of universality of religion that these studies seek to measure lies a hidden exclusivism. In other words, the Pew survey draws a general conclusion that the American public is becoming less religious without a serious engagement with the criteria used to establish the category of the religious – the very thing they seek to measure. This gives the (potentially false) impression that religion in general is declining when all that was measured was a particular kind of religion. A closer look at some of the data used to draw these conclusions will help to explain this point.

Examining the religious behaviors, beliefs, and relative importance of religion in one’s life, Pew research shows that older generations are, across the board, more religious than younger generations.⁴⁵² This would seem like good evidence that secularization is real, especially given the earlier point raised by Steve Bruce that people do not tend to become more religious as they age. In other words, if each subsequent generation is significantly less religious than its predecessor, this would seem to indicate an overall decline of religiosity. And this is what the authors of the Pew survey concludes.⁴⁵³ However, we must pay close attention to what criteria is

⁴⁵² Ibid., 7, 10.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

being measured. As the American public becomes more religiously and culturally diverse over time, it is possible, plausible, and even likely that old criteria and categorical distinctions are becoming less relevant. While they may be more applicable in, say 19th century England, the same cannot be assumed for 21st century America. The 2014 survey that compared generational religiosity examined the rates at which respondents (a) pray, (b) attend religious services, (c) believe in God, (d) believe heaven, and (e) believe in hell, (f) believe scripture to be the word of God, and (g) find religion to be very important in their lives. It is noteworthy that, for example, we see a sharp decline in those who pray daily. While 67% of the Silent Generation pray daily, only 39% of Millennials do the same. Furthermore, 51% of the Silent Generation attend services weekly and 92% believe in God while only 28% of Millennials attend services weekly and only 80% believe in God. This could very well be demonstrative of an overall decline of religiosity and thus an indication of secularization in the United States. However, we must consider the degree to which such criteria appropriately describe the full range of religiosity. Steve Bruce clearly interprets data such as this (in addition to other data) as evidence of religious decline. However, others like Grace Davie, Thomas Luckmann, Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and William Bainbridge are likely to see this as evidence of religious evolution, change, or innovation. To be clear, I am not siding with either group.⁴⁵⁴ I am arguing that the data derived from studies such as this one are too rigid and narrow to capture the broad range of an always fluctuating category of religion. The problem is not that religion cannot be defined; the problem is that there are too

⁴⁵⁴ This is not to say that those who see religious evolution, change, or innovation are all in agreement with each other. I hope that the previous chapter demonstrated the ways in which they differ from each other.

many ways to define religion for any survey or combination of surveys to adequately measure “it”.⁴⁵⁵

The problem is that many surveys and studies continue to present particular religious categories as universally applicable. For example, there is an engrained set of Protestant assumptions in the Pew survey that privilege the criteria of God, scripture, prayer, and church attendance. Unfortunately, this does not describe religion generally. It does not, for example, ask respondents to what degree can they locate the nature of their suffering in the natural world. It does not ask how frequently one contemplates the interconnected nature of all things. It does not ask how often one has private, silent conversations with loved ones who have passed. It does not ask if one’s service to the poor and the marginalized is inspired by his view that everyone deserves basic human dignity. It cannot capture the fluid, complex nature of individual, lived religion. Instead, it favors orthodoxy over praxis, institutional religion over lived religion, and the traditional over the modern. While I explore this point in more detail when I introduce Meredith McGuire’s work, it is worth noting the ways in which such studies continue to rely upon - and thus reinforce - orthodox, institutional, and traditional categories of the religious. People are clearly attending traditional, institutional religious services at lower rates. The question is whether or not this is indicative of a general decline in religiosity or not. Is it possible that one’s sense of religious communal engagement is being fulfilled by Facebook memes, online communities, and YouTube sermons? And what about those who find spiritual fulfillment in the Eastern Sierra mountains or at Burning Man in the Nevada desert? Surely, each of us can decide which of these questions properly draw a line between the religious and the secular. These

⁴⁵⁵ This is notably reminiscent of Jonathan Smith’s contention that the problem is that “religion can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways.” Smith, *Relating Religion*, 281.

are more extreme examples, of course, but the point is that there is no consistent way to do so between individuals, across cultures, and through time.

When Pew relies upon Protestant, orthodox standards of religiosity, it excludes a number of unorthodox religious expressions. For example, a common criterion measured in such surveys is a person's interpretation of scripture. That is, respondents in the 2014 Pew survey are asked, "Is the Bible/Quran/Torah/Holy Scripture the word of God? Should it be taken literally, word for word?"⁴⁵⁶ This question assumes much that cannot – and should not – be extended to various forms of religiosity. While scripture is clearly paramount from the Protestant Christian perspective, the same cannot be said about other religious orientations. Furthermore, the question assumes that literal interpretations indicate a higher degree of religiosity while other, non-literal interpretations indicate lower levels of religiosity.

It is important to note that not all religious traditions see scripture as centrally important. In chapter 3, we saw the ways in which Buddhism was "discovered" (read: invented) by Western powers. In discovering "Buddhism," contemporary scholars assumed that "it" would have all of the necessary elements of religion: a founder, holy scriptures, a code of ethics, etc. Masuzawa explains that each of these elements was artificially constructed rather than merely discovered. Most notably, various texts found from differing cultural and religious communities were collected and elevated to the status of "holy scriptures." It is not that such texts did not exist; rather, there was little-to-no indication that they were nearly as important or central to those who preserved them. Essentially, by picking out the Protestant elements that were found in various "Buddhist" communities, Buddhism was constructed as a form of religion that fit the categorical standards set by Protestant Europeans. Where the practice did not fit these European ideals or

⁴⁵⁶ Cooperman, Smith, and Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 58.

standards, Europeans would explain that there once existed a truer, or purer, form of Buddhism in the past; once this was pointed out, then Protestants could help Buddhists re-discover their own heritage.⁴⁵⁷ My point is that surveys such as Pew and Gallup function to further cement these Protestant Western assumptions.

What, then, are we to make of a survey that asks Buddhists – a largely non-theistic tradition - whether or not they believe that their “holy scriptures” are the word of God?⁴⁵⁸ The Pew Research Center indicates that 5% of American Buddhists in 2014 believe that scriptures should be taken literally and 15% believe that they are the NET word of God? In 2007, 8% of American Buddhists believed that scriptures should be taken literally and 15% believed that they are the NET word of God. Does this indicate religious decline? Or, could this be an indication of religious revivalism? That is, if one takes the rejection of such beliefs about scripture as a sign of religious maturity in Buddhism – understanding that such “scriptures” are merely teachings about the non-self, the nature of suffering, and guided paths to enlightenment – then to what degree can we find any value in such data? I am arguing that it tells us very little about “religion” and says a lot more about the limits of such surveys. Take, for example, a note the authors of the Pew study make in a difference between the 2007 and 2014 surveys. They write, “Jains were counted as Hindus in 2007 but are included in the ‘other world religions’ tradition in 2014.”⁴⁵⁹ While it is perhaps reassuring that Jains account for less than one-tenth of 1% of 2014 respondents (“reassuring” in that such a confusion will have little impact on the overall study), it is worrisome that an entire religious tradition can be completely mis-categorized. How can we be confident in the survey’s ability to account for the deep structural and substantive nuances of

⁴⁵⁷ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 129.

⁴⁵⁸ Cooperman, Smith, and Cornibert, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, 58.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

various religious identities when Jains were being counted as Hindus? To what degree can the survey account for the innumerable ways in which one can be “Christian” or “Jewish,” for example? Should a Christian who interprets scripture to be the literal word of God be considered *more* religious than the Christian who believes it was written by humans and ought to be interpreted metaphorically? If not, what analytical tools are available to the surveyor to account for such religious differences? The same can be said for other criteria used to establish rates of religiosity. Consider prayer, for example. The person who prays daily and goes to church regularly will appear to be more religious than the person who, because of her religious identity, has committed her life to fighting for social justice in the courtrooms and streets of America. The same problem exists when considering the other criteria used to establish the boundaries of religion, whether it be the rates at which people believe in God, or heaven, or hell, or the frequency of which one attends church or prays. Each of these standards are not only implicitly Christian, they assumed a traditional and orthodox form of Christian belief and practice. For example, while the question “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?” applies easily to many forms of Islam and is easily understood by Muslims, it becomes more complicated for Hindus, and we see this bear out in the data.⁴⁶⁰ 99% of Muslims and 88% of Hindus said that they believe in God. The problem is that while it appears that both Hindus and Muslims believe in God at high rates, they likely interpret God very differently. The term “Brahman” can be defined as the interconnectedness of all things, the oneness of the universe, or as collective consciousness. Its Sanskrit root BRH means “to grow” or “to expand.” Incapable of fully understanding or properly articulating the complex meaning of Brahman in the context of Hindu philosophy and cosmology, Westerners translated “Brahman” to “God.” This is an example of

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 146.

what J. Z. Smith called the transformation of the unfamiliar to the familiar. The translation becomes a *transformation*. Undoing such a process is impossible. Ongoing Western imperialism and colonization created a world where Indian Hindus adopted many Western categories and terminologies. Therefore, while many Hindus are comfortable using the word “God” to describe “Brahman,” the Western observer must be aware that this is notably different than what the Evangelical Protestant takes “God” to mean. As we will see later in this chapter when reviewing Meredith McGuire’s *Lived Religion*, such sociological categories are both ineffective and misleading when employed in such broad social surveys.

The question that carries more weight and has a greater potential for cutting across cultural and religious boundaries is “How important is religion in your life?”⁴⁶¹ The generalized nature of the question allows for a greater degree of interpretation to be had. In other words, while a respondent may respond with low levels of prayer and church attendance, she may indicate, in answering this question, that religion is “very” important in her life. If we see a high disparity between answers to this question and questions that assume a number of specific criteria (prayer, belief in God, church attendance, etc.) it ought to make us rethink the efficacy of such surveys. For example, 72% of Buddhists surveyed said that religion was either “very” or “somewhat” important in their lives while only 8% of Buddhists said that they look to religious teachings and beliefs “when it comes to questions of right and wrong.”⁴⁶² Compare this to the 60% of Evangelical Protestants who said they look to religious teachings and beliefs when it comes to questions of right and wrong.⁴⁶³ 79% of Evangelical Protestants say that religion is

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 149, 170.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 170.

“very” important in their lives.⁴⁶⁴ In other words, while Buddhists and Evangelical Protestants consider religion to be important in their lives at similar rates, there is a considerable difference when it comes to other, more particular criteria. This trend extends more or less to the other criteria used in this survey, including their views on scripture, belief in God, frequency of prayer, frequency in reading scripture, and belief in heaven and hell.⁴⁶⁵

A further indication that surveyors are incapable of adequately measuring religion across cultures is the rise of the “nones.” The pair of surveys show a rather significant increase in the number of people who say that they do not belong to any organized faith, rising from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014.⁴⁶⁶ Now, one could interpret this as a sign of secularization, claiming that this indicates a growing religious apathy or a decline in religiosity. This may very well be the case. However, researchers clarify that not all of the “nones” are non-believers. “In fact,” they write, “the majority of Americans without a religious affiliation say they believe in God.”⁴⁶⁷ They do explain that the nones are less religiously observant than those who do claim a religious affiliation, but this could also be explained by a number of other interpretations, including the changing nature of religious practices over time or the inherent complexity of the category of religion itself. These interpretations make more sense when we see that the “study also suggests that in some ways Americans are becoming more spiritual.”⁴⁶⁸ They continue, “About six-in-ten adults now say they regularly feel a deep sense of ‘spiritual peace and well-being,’ up 7 percentage points since 2007.”⁴⁶⁹ Furthermore, the surveyors explain that there has been a sharp

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 146, 149, 152, 155, 158, 170, 173, 176, 179.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 3, 5, 146.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

increase in those who say “they feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe on a weekly basis.”⁴⁷⁰ The point of all of this is that while it may be clear that we are witnessing a general decline in some forms of religiosity, more caution ought to be exercised before concluding religious decline. Reaching such a conclusion from the data available is to reinforce and further establish a particular *kind* of religion – namely a Western, Protestant, post-Enlightenment religiosity – at the expense of non-traditional, non-Western (potential) religious expressions. The Pew survey referenced in the past few pages opens with the following question and answer: “Is the American public becoming less religious? Yes, at least by some *key measures* [italics mine] of what it means to be a religious person.”⁴⁷¹ The very assumption that these criteria are “key measures” of “religiosity” reinforces the assumption that there are a number of central, dominant, or foundational measures by which religion is appropriately understood. This is the very assumption I am challenging. If we passively accept one set of definitions over other possible and always emerging definitions, we are bound to limit our ability to locate or comprehend the religious.

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, who holds a Ph.D. in religious studies as well as a J.D., makes a similar argument in her book, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*.⁴⁷² She argues that religious freedom is “impossible” due in large part to the ways in which religion eludes a comprehensive definition. She explains that in order to prohibit religious establishment and to protect religious freedom, courts and judges must rely upon a *definition* of religion.⁴⁷³ The court must be able to identify what exactly it is protecting and/or prohibiting. The courts must decide if

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷² Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 2-6.

any person or persons (or their practices, beliefs, etc.) qualify as officially religious. Defining religion, she explains, is a difficult task. Any definition will either exclude many groups who consider themselves religious or include such a wide variety of beliefs and practices that the category will be rendered meaningless. Drawing a boundary around what is religious is even trickier in the United States, where much of the religious culture is not represented by official Church dogmas or institutional creeds. In other words, it is common for Americans' religious orientations to be non-traditional – often described as “folk religion” - and not recognized by official church teaching.⁴⁷⁴

In order to demonstrate the ways in which this is a problem in the United States, she uses a case study, *Warner v. Boca Raton*.⁴⁷⁵ This case involves a cemetery in Boca Raton, Florida whose rules state that any decorations for graves must not be vertically extending from the ground. Many of the family members of the deceased went ahead and decorated their loved ones' graves with vertical decorations for a variety of “religious” reasons.⁴⁷⁶ When the family members of the deceased were asked to remove the vertical decorations, they claimed that these were religious expressions and that removing them would violate their Constitutional rights to religious freedom. In deciding whether or not their removal would be a violation of the religious freedom, the courts had to determine whether or not these acts or symbols were officially (or legally) “religious.”⁴⁷⁷

In order to determine this, the court calls on a variety of religious “experts,” who are mostly representatives from the various religious traditions with which the defendants are

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 55-58.

associated. They were asked to explain if the decorations (or the act of decorating itself) were in fact “religious” and whether or not they were “central” to their religious traditions.⁴⁷⁸ A variety of problems ensue, including the idea that one person, who has a particular relationship with a religious institution, is being asked to speak for the entire religion and for people whom he or she does not know. Sullivan’s criticism is that religion – especially American religion - is often much more about personal relationships, smaller communal bonds, and less about religious institutions, rules, and dogmas. This puts the courts in a difficult or, what Sullivan calls, *impossible* position. On the one hand, courts must rely upon some definition of religion; otherwise the religion clauses of the First Amendment are reduced to a useless and meaningless state. On the other hand, they cannot grant every religious exemption based on a personal want or desire to do something.

The argument comes down to two different understandings of what religion is. The city argued that the actions of the plaintiffs were not religious; rather, they were merely personal and idiosyncratic.⁴⁷⁹ That is, the markers and decorations were more about their personal relationships with the deceased and less about any officially recognized religious practices. The defendants, for whom Sullivan served as an expert witness, claimed that at the heart of one’s religion is how a person deals with death. Such practices or beliefs need not be reinforced or corroborated by a religious institution. After all, if fewer people are associating with traditional and institutional forms of religion, on what basis is it appropriate for such “official” institutions to determine what is appropriately religious or not?

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 57-88.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 87.

Sullivan comes to find that in the context of the *Warner* case (and presumably many other cases), the court eventually relies upon religiously orthodox definitions and criteria. Because there are clearer rules or outlines as to what officially is and is not religion, its form more easily fits the demands of law. Relatedly, I am arguing that social scientific surveys and theories that seek to measure rates of religiosity over time also rely upon traditional, orthodox definitions of religion. That is, the types of answers that the court and such surveys demand are more easily provided by religious institutions that keep membership records, rates of attendance, and that have specific dogmas and creeds outlining the tenets of the faith. This, however, does not make them any more *religious*. However, because such religious expressions are easier to identify and measure over time, they more often represent the religious in general. Sullivan concludes that religious freedom is impossible because much of the religion in the United States does not fit easily into the traditional and orthodox standards of institutional religion. She claims that American religion is often found on the periphery of normative, or traditional, institutional religion.⁴⁸⁰ We must start asking ourselves to what extent the religious is being appropriately represented in courtrooms and social scientific surveys. To be clear, I am not saying that any one definition of religion is more accurate than another. The point is that relying on any one is to ignore other forms and expressions of religiosity.

The larger point that I am trying to make is that the religious boundaries required by social theorists of secularization are too rigid, or fixed, to capture the varieties of religiosity that exist across cultures and time. Another way of saying this is that “ordinary” or “lived” religion does not always conform to the categorical boundaries which are established by social theorists. In the face of this fundamental problem, secularization theorists and surveyors of religion

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 147.

continue to forge an unwarranted path forward; they insist that religion has a number of key measures or basic criteria that can be appropriately and reliably measured across cultures and over time. Meredith McGuire's book, *Lived Religion*, shows the ways in which such social scientific surveys are largely incapable of capturing the variety and constantly evolving nature of religion, especially in the United States.⁴⁸¹

Meredith McGuire, professor of sociology and anthropology, focuses on the particularity of individuals' religious beliefs in order to expose the inherent flaws of the standard typological notions of religion. She emphasizes that scholars - and sociologists of religion in particular - ought to begin with individuals, rather than categories, when trying to understand religion. She writes,

What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important. [...] My intent in writing this book is to challenge scholars of religion, especially sociologists, to rethink fundamental conceptualizations of what we study and how we study it.⁴⁸²

In order to demonstrate the ineffective nature of such categories, she introduces and analyzes various instances of “lived religion” expressed by a number of people living in the United States. The problem is that sociologists begin with a broad and established category of religion that was born out of the Enlightenment and then they seek to locate that religiosity in society. McGuire's point is not that sociologists cannot find such instances of religion; her point is that they are only capturing a particular form of religiosity.

Upon interviewing people, McGuire begins to see that each religious expression and belief is truly unique; they do not map easily onto the religious categories that sociologists of

⁴⁸¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 4.

religion have been relying upon. Or, to put it in her words, “The standard notions of religion are wholly inadequate.”⁴⁸³ Because of this inadequacy, she suggests that sociologists ought to start with the individual rather than the category. Starting with categories shapes the subject before the subject is even investigated. As stated earlier, one problem with the standard typologies of religion is that they are too rigid; they cannot adapt to the unique contours of individuals’ religious expressions. Additionally, such categories account for too much. She agrees with Talal Asad, for example, that “we should not view religion as some ‘transhistorical essence,’ existing as a timeless and unitary phenomenon. As Asad and many others have demonstrated, not only do religions change over time but also what people understand to be ‘religion’ changes.”⁴⁸⁴ The fields of anthropology and sociology (of religion) were made possible when the category of religion was conceived of as an objective reality, or as something that exists naturally, universally, and transhistorically that can be discovered and analyzed.⁴⁸⁵ A sociologist herself, she writes, “Our discipline’s conceptual tools are, thus, limited by a Eurocentric bias. They do not adequately apply to non-Western religions, especially those religions that are not structured at all like Western religious organizations with ‘membership’ of individuals.”⁴⁸⁶ Furthermore, as we will come to see, the conceptual tools are limited when applied to a number of Western religions as well. The lived religious beliefs and practices of many Christians, for example, are in conflict with many official teachings and traditional practices of the institutional church. At the individual level, we might be left with a messier, always changing, never static, more difficult to grasp set of beliefs and practices, but this is the nature of religious belief. Because of this, she

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

highly doubts the accuracy or efficacy of much of the sociological work that has focused on religion, especially with regard to secularization theories. She writes,

How can we interpret the changes in the social location of religion and the changed place of religion in individual lives if we fail to recognize that our field's core conceptual distinctions are themselves social products? For instance, how can we interpret comparative rates of church membership without acknowledging that the very definition and meaning of membership changed dramatically? How can we compare individual patterns of religiosity over time without admitting that what we researchers count as "religious" is completely different from what, for example, fourteenth-century persons in Languedoc, for example, considered "religious?"⁴⁸⁷

In addition to there being a broad range of difference over time, say when comparing the religiosities of 14th century Languedoc to 21st century America, McGuire demonstrates the ways in which contemporary forms of American religion are at odds with prominent sociological definitions and typologies.

"Lived religion," she argues, is the common religious practices and beliefs of ordinary people. It is diverse, complex, sometimes inconsistent, and often at odds with established and institutionalized forms of religion. She writes, "Clearly, these individuals' religions were not just personal copies of the official package marketed by the American Catholic 'firm.' Nor were they the result of a taken-for-granted Catholic worldview..."⁴⁸⁸ She is not saying that lived religion is purely subjective or that it is the idiosyncratic expressions of one's complex identity; rather, lived religion can take on a larger, intersubjective status within a broader community.⁴⁸⁹ Her point is that it is always fluctuating and often in tension with official doctrine, traditions, and creedal statements. Furthermore, it is not always logically sound. Referring to some of her subjects, she writes, "As the stories of people like Peter, Laura, Ron, and Margaret suggest, when

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

we consider all these aspects of individual religiosity and spirituality, we discover that they rarely resemble the tidy, consistent, and theologically correct packages official religions promote.”⁴⁹⁰ Such religious beliefs and practices do not need to be logically consistent or related to any set of established practices. Rather, they need to be practically and internally coherent, which often makes them invisible to social researchers and theorists. She explains

As long ago as the 1970s, some sociologists like Luckmann were critical of research efforts to tap contemporary individuals’ religions, with all their eclectically chosen and often “invisible” elements, by using standard methodologies like survey questionnaires. But it is simply impossible to construct a research instrument that anticipates all the possible elements individuals might choose to weave into their own personal beliefs and practices, much less all the possible permutations and creative intermixing each individual might create from these many diverse elements.⁴⁹¹

She goes on to explain that her research focuses on the “nonofficial, unrecognized, even ‘invisible’ elements of individuals’ religions, in all their complexity.”⁴⁹² Furthermore, she does not believe that this form of religion is anything new. It is likely, she explains, that such forms of lived religion were commonplace in medieval Europe and colonial America. However, due to the lack of qualitative research on the topic, we are left with a broader, more distant set of quantitative data on church membership, attendance, frequency of prayer, etc. In other words, the very kinds of data found in 21st social surveys and secularization theories.

An example of this can be found in McGuire’s introduction of the subjects of her study. She explains that each of them would be mis-categorized by a typical social survey on religion. For example, she writes, “using standard indices of religiosity, sociologists would have counted Laura’s rich mixture of religious practices merely as ‘nonpracticing Catholic’ or ‘cultural Catholic.’ [...] Margaret, the gardening meditator, would have been described as ‘unchurched’ or

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

having ‘no religion.’ And Ron, whose religious practices may have included as much ‘popular religion’ as Laura’s, would be categorized as ‘conservative Protestant’ and would appear to have the highest level of religiosity of the four.”⁴⁹³ She then explains that the majority of their religiously motivated practices would not have been counted as religious because “Western scholars’ concepts of religion and religious commitment develop out of the European crucible of religious contests... [whose] assumptions clearly fail to describe adequately how individuals engage in their religions in their everyday lives.”⁴⁹⁴ To pick on Ron again, she explains that typical social surveys would perceive Ron to be “highly religious.” He identifies as a conservative evangelical and claims that religion is very important in his life. However, upon further discussion with Ron, McGuire came to find that his church attendance is rather passive, as he rarely takes an active role in any church events. Another subject of hers, who identifies as a Unitarian Universalist and who almost never attends church, would likely be categorized as “less religious” than Ron. McGuire explains that this subject was actually heavily involved with his religious community and structured much of his life around his faith in God. The point is not that Ron is less religious than the Unitarian Universalist, or vice-versa. McGuire is not suggesting that we replace the old system of locating and measuring religiosity with a newer, more accurate system. The point is that religion itself cannot be singularly defined while also be sufficiently representative of non-Western traditions, practices, and beliefs.

She provides a more detailed example of this criticism when examining the ways in which the religious beliefs and practices Latinas and Latinos in the United States are often misunderstood or completely overlooked. Because the category of religion is largely informed by

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 12.

a number of Protestant standards and assumptions, many Catholic Latinas and Latinos are misrepresented. She explains, “Some unexamined Protestant assumptions have slipped into sociological thought, leading many scholars to exclude predominantly Catholic practices as not ‘real’ religion.”⁴⁹⁵ For example, it is common for Mexican-American Catholic women to find religious expression and value in the home rather than at the church. Their faith in God is commonly expressed in personal relationships formed with the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁴⁹⁶ Many Mexican-American women have home altars that they adorn with a number of personal and communal items that are not informed by official church traditions, thus blurring the lines of the sacred and the profane. Furthermore, McGuire discovers that many of these women have frequent, often silent, ongoing conversations with a number of Catholic saints, including the Virgin of Guadalupe. However, when asked how often they pray, she says they might answer “‘About once a day,’ thinking of praying as saying a specific prayer, such as the Rosary. They do not necessarily think of these frequent practices at the home altar or their regular conversations with the Virgin as prayer.”⁴⁹⁷ Arguably, there is something deeply religious about these daily practices. However, they cannot be accounted for in large quantitative social surveys. Such surveys must, in order to determine trends, establish a number of boundaries which exclude a broad range of potential religious expressions. Furthermore, the woman who carries on long, deep conversations with the Virgin of Guadalupe may not even consider such practices as religious herself. She may be correct. It is not for me to say. The problem is that such differences are not only not accounted for, they are presented as illegitimate.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

The value of McGuire's qualitative research is that it has the power to resist and challenge the dominant assumptions engrained in a number of sociological surveys and theories of religion and secularization. The stiff, outdated, particular categorical distinctions and definitions employed in such surveys perpetuate a historically and culturally bound category of religion that is incapable of accounting for the common, ordinary person's religious identity. Thus, in continuing to rely upon such categories is to marginalize the ordinary and to silence the majority. It is an exercise of power itself, made more powerful when hiding behind the "neutrality" and "objectivity" of the social sciences.

Lastly, McGuire argues that "Sociology needs to historicize not only its debates about secularization but also its use of core concepts defining religion and religiosity."⁴⁹⁸ That is, scholars must account for the genealogical construction of the category of religion and become open to the ways in which such constructions are challenged by ordinary, lived religion. Rather than account for these points of contestation by unveiling underrepresented and marginalized forms of religion, sociologists have long favored traditional, clean, orthodox definitions of religion. While they may not be perfect, they claim, they are good enough. Let us remember, for example, when Steve Bruce laments, "Social scientists spend far too much time quibbling over words, but it is useful to begin with some idea of the key concepts."⁴⁹⁹ It is this premature dismissal of the complexities of religious identity that I find especially perplexing and problematic. It seems unlikely that Bruce is unaware of the inherent problems in keeping to such a restrictive, narrow conception of religion. In doing so, however, he is unable to account for non-traditional and non-Western forms of religion. Furthermore, drawing upon the work of

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹⁹ Bruce, *Secularization*, 1.

anthropologist Eric Wolff, McGuire explains that “the power to determine the terms of discourse [...] is a particularly effective and invisible form of power.”⁵⁰⁰ Judges define what types of beliefs and practices are correct and defensible; academics decide what types of religion are represented; bishops and church leaders decide the canon. It is not the common, ordinary, or “lived” forms of religion that have the power to decide what does and does not count as religion. It is no wonder we are left with a predominantly European, Protestant, and post-Enlightenment definition of religion that is presented as natural, universal, transhistorical, and transcultural. Typical social surveys are incapable of accounting for challenges to this narrative. Too often, such contestations are interpreted as religious decline. Or, as McGuire puts it,

Those who eventually lost the definitional battles put up considerable resistance and struggle, but the net outcome was that many of their most valued religious practices no longer counted as religion. Powerful social and cultural groups changed the terms of discourse about religion. They had drawn new definitional boundaries.⁵⁰¹

When we take the category of religion to be a naturally occurring, universal phenomenon that can be located through time and across cultures, we must identify and define “it.” If there is an essence that can be located and measured, then that essence must be defined. However, the project of defining is not a democratic process which fairly represents the interests and perspectives of all people. And even if it were, this would not lead to a representative definition. The point is that no definition can account for the complex diversity of beliefs and practices that exist across cultures and through time. McGuire explains that the current state of affairs is that sociologists, in the face of such an impossible task, have overwhelmingly relied upon a narrow, Protestant-European form of religion. “Such historically and culturally bound conceptual limits,” she explains, “prevent us from adequately understanding *non*-European religious expressions –

⁵⁰⁰ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 43.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

especially popular religion and other indigenous religious expression not made in the image of modern Euro-American religion.”⁵⁰²

With these criticisms in mind, let us again consider the basic claims of secularization theory as well as some of the prominent rebuttals. Steve Bruce argues that the secularization paradigm explains the decline⁵⁰³ and displacement⁵⁰⁴ of religion from the center of human life. In order to develop his theory of secularization, he relies upon a narrowly constructed, Protestant-European definition of religion that presents religion to be a naturally occurring, universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon.⁵⁰⁵ He then demonstrates the ways in which this type of religion has been displaced in modern society. Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, and Roger Finke offer a series of responses, which argue that while secularization occurs, it is followed by instances of religious revivalism and innovation. They, too, believe that religion is a naturally occurring, universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon that can be traced over time and across cultures.⁵⁰⁶ Put differently, much like Bruce, Stark et. al. assume that religion is an identifiable and quantifiable aspect of society that can be measured over time and across cultures in a consistent manner. Meredith McGuire reminds us that while the latter group relies upon a similar set of Western, Protestant assumptions, they simply focus on a different set

⁵⁰² Ibid., 44.

⁵⁰³ Bruce, *Secularization*, 23, 99, 120.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 1, 120.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 1. Bruce defines religion as “Beliefs, actions, and institutions based on the existence of supernatural entities with powers of agency (that is, Gods) or impersonal processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu and Buddhist notion of karma, for example) that set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs.” Ibid., 1.

⁵⁰⁶ Stark and Bainbridge, *Future of Religion*, 5. They define religion in the following way: “religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, of force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural.” Ibid., 5.

of religious indicators.⁵⁰⁷ Both sides of this debate, however, fail to account for a wide variety of religious expressions that exist beyond the post-Enlightenment Protestant criterion of *belief* in a supernatural entity. It begs a variety of questions, one of which McGuire asks when she writes, “What would sociologists of religion notice or understand differently if we were to reexamine contemporary religious expression with an eye to religious practice – not just belief?”⁵⁰⁸ Might we begin to see a variety of religious expressions that our social surveys failed to see? McGuire then turns to the work of acclaimed sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who provides detailed reports of non-traditional spiritual practices. McGuire claims that reports published in his book, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*, confirm many of her key findings on questions such as:

Are the personal spiritual practices of persons who do not adhere to the norms for church religiosity necessarily more superficial than that of those who do? Are people who focus on so-called spiritual practices somehow more individualistic and self-centered than those who focus on what they consider “religious” practices? Can we speak of commitment and discipline in reference to spiritualities that are not closely connected with a religious group?⁵⁰⁹

McGuire explains that both his reports and her findings agree that there is a wealth of religious and spiritual practices that sociologists have not considered and are therefore unable to locate.⁵¹⁰ Creative religious expressions and spiritual depths are found in routines and rituals around making food and art, eating with others, creating music, engaging in healing practices, and serving one’s community.⁵¹¹ Among all of the examples found in Wuthnow’s work, “only a few [...] (barely) fit the standard image of church-oriented spiritual practice.”⁵¹² With this in mind, McGuire admits, “Realizing the complexities of individuals’ religious practices, experiences, and

⁵⁰⁷ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 23.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 115-116.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 115-118.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 97-118.

⁵¹² Ibid., 116.

expressions [...] has made me extremely doubtful that even mountains of quantitative sociological data can tell us much of any value about individuals' religions."⁵¹³ This leads me to ask a final question: Why, if standard definitions and religious typologies are so ineffective in locating a wide-range of religious expressions, do secularization theorists continue to rely upon them?

I believe the answer to this question lies in another question: Why do we care if there is more or less religion in society? If this is truly a question held objectively at arm's length – one that we do not place personal value or judgment on – then we cannot remain blind to the inefficiencies of modern social surveys that rely upon particular, traditional, narrow, Western, and Protestant notions of the religious. They are largely non-representative and functioning to further reinforce a historical discrepancy in power: one that favors the West over the rest. Another pertinent question is: If secularization theories are incapable of consistently measuring religiosity over time and across space, is it not only a question of what purposes they serve, but *whose* purpose they serve? In short, I am arguing that ideological constructions of the religious are being preserved by secularization theorists because they function to sustain, propel, and even justify a set of judgments on the social value of religion. In other words, I am suggesting that the propelling and sustaining force behind secularization theories is their ability to function as proxy debates for political arguments about the value of religion in the modern world. In obfuscating dimensions of power involved in the construction and evolution of the categories of the religious and the secular by presenting these categories as universally existing and neutrally defined, arguments on the social value of religion remain hidden behind the guise of objective social scientific research. In other words, if one insists that religion must be defined by a belief in the

⁵¹³ Ibid., 5.

supernatural and by that which is fundamentally irrational, then the social value of religion will undoubtedly wane in a “modern secular society,” which is defined by an increasing reliance upon scientific modes of thinking that contradict the supernatural and the irrational. Therefore, as Bruce continues to see a decline in religiosity alongside scientific and technological advancements, his theory implies the declining social value of religion. What good can religion provide if its very basic and fundamental components are increasingly being disproven?

Bruce preserves a narrowly constructed definition of religion that emphasizes belief in the supernatural and the irrational. He continues to point to studies and surveys that focus on these particular aspects of the religious and in doing so helped support arguments about the value of religion. Those who claim that religion is an irrational remnant of a pre-Enlightenment past point to the data and theories found in Pew research or Steve Bruce’s work. It reminds me of E.B. Tylor’s 19th century assertion that religion is the adolescence of human evolution and should be left of our serious discussion.⁵¹⁴ His prediction was that religion would eventually be completely replaced by a modern, secular worldview. This is the reason, I am arguing, that Bruce continues to rely upon traditional, institutional, and orthodox modes of measuring the religious. “See!” they can point out, “In light of a modern, rational, enlightened worldview, religion is dissipating! Just as we predicted!” José Casanova explains that this was an Enlightenment assumption that continues to occupy a space in the modern sociological imaginary.⁵¹⁵ The assumption was that the “‘darkness’ of religious ignorance and superstition would fade away when exposed to the ‘lights’ of reason.”⁵¹⁶ Secularization theories are modern, quantified iterations of this very same sentiment.

⁵¹⁴ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*.

⁵¹⁵ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 30.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

Others, who argue that religion is inextricably interwoven into the moral fabric of humanity point to the social-scientific conclusions of someone like Rodney Stark. To this group, religion is an essential and fundamental aspect of our identity, especially with regard to how we respond to unanswerable questions and questions with less-than-satisfying answers. If religion functions to provide better and more pleasing answers to the most pressing questions of the day, then its value will adapt and grow alongside our growing understanding of the universe. Stark and Finke argue that religion is socially valuable because it is essentially rational, it is the source of morality, and it is beneficial to one's mental and physical health.⁵¹⁷ As our scientific understanding of the world continues to grow in the modern world, the religious sphere continues to occupy an always changing space in the human imaginary. It continues to provide a social good – in the form of compensators – to those who are seeking answers in a world where there are still many questions. Religion is thus deeply engrained in the human experience. It is *not* irrational. It is the outcome of rational choice. Therefore, religion will always provide a social value; it helps us interpret the world and our various experiences with it.

On both sides of the secularization debate we have social theorists ignoring the pervasive presence of a wide-range of religious expressions in favor of a set of criteria that functions to further legitimize particular – though differing – Western, Protestant assumptions about religion. The early ideological constructions of the categories of the religious and the secular not only remain present in their theories on secularization; they serve to obfuscate their respective views on the social value of religion. In the end, the safer – and perhaps more important - argument is that such social-scientific research tells us more about the surveyor(s) than the surveyed. We

⁵¹⁷ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 31-32.

need to begin reading such surveys and theories with more critical attention paid to the questions used than the responses received.

I will conclude with some recommendations. Social surveyors and secularization theorists need to more seriously engage and account for the constructed nature of the category of religion. This will provide a better representation of the diversity and complexity of the religious while also allowing both theorists and ordinary people to begin challenging the ideological constructions that form its foundation. If secularization theory is to avoid many of the criticisms raised in this project, it must account for the constructed nature of these categories. So long as they continue to begin with broad categories that are assumed to represent a range of individuals, they will continue to face the unavoidable problem of misunderstanding or overlooking individual expressions of the religious. That is to say, when conducting such research, sociologists need to rethink some of their basic methodological assumptions. Instead of seeking to locate, measure, and trace “religion” in general, such surveys and theories must exercise more restraint by refusing to accept a number of inherited categories that have limited explanatory power. Secularization may be occurring. It may not be. The problem is that we are not yet equipped to answer this question. We have remained blind to a wide range of complex, diverse, messy, and always evolving potential expressions of religiosity because the adopted categories of the religious and the secular have gone largely unquestioned. I am arguing that it is about time that we do a bit more “quibbling over words.” In his book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh explains that “A story takes on the status of myth when it becomes unquestioned. It becomes very difficult to think outside the paradigm that the myth establishes and reflects because myth and reality become mutually reinforcing.”⁵¹⁸ I have argued that the basic,

⁵¹⁸ Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 6.

fundamental components of secularization – the religious and the secular – have gone unquestioned for too long. Because of this, it is difficult, if not impossible, for many of us to think outside of the religious-secular paradigm. To question these concepts is to unravel the logic that holds the whole enterprise together. Until sociologists more seriously engage the constructed nature of the categories of the religious and the secular, secularization will remain a myth. A powerful myth, indeed.

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